Universally Accepted Teachings

Of

Shankara Bhagavatpada

(*Sri Shankarabhagavatpadara Sarvasammatopadeshagalu)*

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written by

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Preface

Brahma Bhuta Parama Pujya Sri Sri Satchidanandendra Saraswati Mahaswamiji delivered discourses in Hubli in 1953 during his Chaturmasya Sankalpa. These lectures, transcribed by Sri Sri himself, were initially published in the Adhyatma Prakasha Patrika. After a reprint in 1984, this third edition consolidates the material into a single volume, faithfully reproducing the original writings without alteration.

Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya is dedicated to disseminating the spiritual literature of Sri Shankaracharya and is actively reprinting numerous books. The support of generous patrons is crucial for this sacred endeavor. The organization primarily uses proceeds from book sales to fund the publication of larger works. Public financial assistance is requested to further expand the book publication fund and make more literature available to readers.

It is widely acknowledged that Vedanta is synonymous with Shankara Vedanta, especially in Western countries. Influential figures like Sri Vivekananda, Sri Rama Tirtha, and Sri Chinmayananda have propagated Shankara Vedanta abroad, solidifying this understanding. It is, however, regrettable that Shankara Vedanta is not as diligently studied and promoted within India. The Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya, for the past 80 years, has strived to compile and present the Universally Accepted Teachings of Sri Shankara Bhagavatpada, the Jagadguru, in Kannada, drawing from the Prasthanatraya Bhashya-s. This work now appears in its third edition.

The author of this book, a leading proponent of Shankara Vedanta in the twentieth century, has distilled the essence of Shankara's commentaries through extensive study, lecturing, and contemplation. He presents the Advaita doctrine within Sri Shankara's *prakriya* (method) with clarity and directness, avoiding complex arguments and philosophical disputes. The author's experiential wisdom shines through, making the subject matter accessible and engaging, as if conversing directly with him. Stories, examples, and analogies are employed to simplify difficult concepts, facilitating a deeper understanding of the main subjects within Sri Shankara's Prasthanatraya Bhashyas.

The book skillfully integrates Sri Shankara's Bhashya verses to illustrate the universal acceptance of Bhagavatpada's teachings, grounded in complete experience. Readers will undoubtedly develop a desire to explore the original Bhashyas of the Acharya. Translation into other languages and broader dissemination would ensure that Bhagavatpada's auspicious messages reach more people, promoting well-being and uniting the world through spiritual knowledge.

For this, scholars and philanthropists should support the Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya in its dedicated work of propagating Adhyatma Vidya (spiritual knowledge) in Karnataka. This crucial task requires the grace of Bhagavatpada. For this third edition, the following individuals from Bangalore city assisted in proofreading: Sri H.N. Rangaswamy, D. Ganapati Shastri, B.R. Satyanarayana (Gajanana), R. Ramachandraiah and C.A. Sanjeeva Murthy. The organization expresses sincere gratitude to them all.

Having had the opportunity to read through and correct the printing errors of this work by the revered Sri, and to publish it, I bow to the divine lotus feet of the Sadguru and complete this introduction.

H.S. Lakshmi Narasimha Murthy, Editor. 8-10-2000

Introduction to the Subject

(30-7-53)

Om Namo Narayanaya!

I am grateful to those who have organized this series of lectures on the Universally Accepted Teachings of Sri Shankaracharya. Yatis (ascetic) observing the Chaturmasya-vrata[1] often lack opportunities for contemplating the ultimate truth. The organizers have done me a great favor by arranging a lecture series on the universally accepted teachings of Sri Shankaracharya. For ascetics observing the Chaturmasya-vrata, staying in one place during the rainy season, such opportunities to focus solely on spiritual contemplation are not always available. It is indeed my good fortune that from Guru Purnima until I stay here, I have been engaged in collecting, reflecting upon, and presenting to the audience the insightful teachings of Acharyas who can make the meaning of Vedanta as clear as a small fruit in one's hand (karatalāmalaka).

The topic is about the teachings of Sri Shankaracharya, so it feels right to say a few words about his life. Unfortunately, it's very hard, or even impossible, to find clear historical details about him. Things like where he was born, when he lived, his parents' names, his childhood, when he became a monk, the teachings he got from his gurus, when he wrote his commentaries, how people reacted to his works, how his fame spread, the places he traveled, when and how he passed away, and how he took disciples—these details are not clearly known. There are about ten or twelve books called "Shankara Vijaya" that praise him, but none were written by people who lived during his time. These stories differ a lot and even contradict each other on key points. Because of this, we can't get a true picture of his life's facts or details. Maybe people back then didn't care about recording history, or maybe the writers thought that since Shankaracharya focused on deep spiritual truths, discussing those truths was enough to honor him. Apart from his Vedanta texts and the further explanations written about them (*vyakhyana-upavyakhyanas)*, we don't have much else today. So, the best way to respect this great man is to remember his teachings from those texts and try to live our lives, even a little, according to them. That's how we can be content in honoring him.

Although this subject is titled 'The Teachings of Shankaracharya,' it is crucial to acknowledge that Acharya himself did not claim these teachings as solely his own. Ample evidence suggests a pre-existing tradition of Vedanta commentary within the lineage of gurus preceding him. As he states in a verse from the Taittiriya Bhashya:

"*yairime gurubhiḥ pūrvaṁ padavākyapramāṇataḥ I vyākhyātāḥ sarvavedāntāstānnityaṁ praṇato'smyaham" -*

"I constantly bow down to those gurus who have already explained all the Upanishads with respect to words, sentences, and means of knowledge."

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[1] Chaturmasya-vrata: A sacred vow undertaken by a sannyasin to remain in one location for four months, from Ashadha (June-July) through Kartika (October-November).

He clearly acknowledges that these are the words of Acharyas steeped in the Vedanta tradition.

Support for this view is also found in the sentences quoted in the Brihadaranyaka, Brahmasutra, and other texts. Therefore, Shankaracharya's teachings are not entirely novel creations; they likely existed, at least in seed form, within the Guru-Shishya lineage he embraced. However, since Acharya presented these principles in his own extraordinary way, it is perfectly acceptable to refer to them as his teachings. Apart from the verses of Sri Gaudapadacharya, no other commentaries or treatises from the Acharya's tradition are currently available, and the opinions of opposing Vedantic schools are similarly scarce. Thus, all Vedanta teachings up to Acharya's time are accessible to us primarily through him. In this sense, they rightfully bear his name. It is like someone bringing water from the Ganges, which Bhagiratha brought to earth, in a pot today and sprinkling it on our heads; we call it Ganga brought by such and such a Pandit (or Shastri).

Now, the extent to which the Vedanta teachings of Shankaracharya discussed in this series of lectures truly reflect his words and the integrity of his original message naturally aligns with the level of my own intellect. Diverse interpretations of the Acharya's opinions have been conveyed to us. Clearly, we cannot accept all mutually contradictory opinions as authentic. Therefore, you must critically discern the authenticity of the teachings I am about to present. Echoing Dharmaraya’s words to Sri Krishna Bhagavan, I too, in regard to Bhagavatpada, say: “With deep reverence for you, I set out to explain your teachings and seek forgiveness for any transgression that may occur in the process. To the extent possible, I pray for your grace and protection, that your heart may be revealed to my humble intellect.”

The adjective 'Universally Accepted,' attached to the word 'Teachings' of the Acharya, warrants further consideration. Can we confidently assert that the teachings of Shankaracharya, or anyone else, embody a universally accepted principle? Schools of thought and philosophical processes inherently create dissent among the followers of their respective founders. Christ, Muhammad, and Buddha—history reveals that their followers have often fragmented into factions with differing interpretations of their teachers' true opinions, engaging in debates. Teachers of various sects themselves have sometimes presented opinions that differ, even contradict each other, and different philosophical processes have emerged over time, leading to disputes among their followers. In this context, is it valid to claim that the teachings of an Acharya, originating in a specific time and country, are equally acceptable to critics and seekers of knowledge in other countries and at other times? Such doubt is understandable.

However, my intention in stating that the Acharya's teachings are universally accepted is this: Because the subject matter the Acharya addresses is not limited by time and space, divergent opinions about ultimate reality, arising from such limitations, are not possible. Take mathematics, for example: eight times four, or twelve times four, does not vary from country to country or era to era, does it? Similarly, the principle the Acharya teaches is not subject to change based on location, time, belief, custom, or anything else. While advanced mathematics may be beyond the grasp of ordinary people, those who acquire the necessary qualifications can understand it. Mathematics may continue to evolve, but the principles already discovered remain immutable. Similarly, the supreme truth upon which Shankaracharya bases his teachings can never be contradicted; it transcends

specific countries, times, or climates. Once understood, everyone must agree that the Acharya's teachings are founded on an eternally existing truth – this is the essence of the term 'Universally Accepted.'

Consider this benedictory verse from Gaudapada Acharya, Shankar's *paramaguru* (supreme guru), at the beginning of the Alatashanti Prakarana (last chapter) of the Mandukya Karika:

aspārśayogo vai nāma sarvasattvasukho hitaḥ |
avivādo'viruddhaśca deśitastaṃ namāmyaham ||

That yoga, indeed, is called the 'association-less' (aspārśa-yoga), which is for the happiness and welfare of all beings. It is free from dispute and contradiction. That (yoga) has been taught, and to it, I bow.

This verse praises Yoga as Advaita philosophy. This philosophy is named *'asparsha yoga*.' Because the supreme reality is non-dual, it never has contact or association (*sparsha*) with anything else. This yoga, or philosophy, has no relation to another object of knowledge (*jñeya*); because it is the very nature of the non-dual Brahman. Therefore, Brahma-Jnanis (knowers of Brahman) call it *'asparsha yoga*'. It brings comfort to all beings, not demanding arduous struggles like austerity to achieve happiness. And unlike means to happiness that may not be beneficial to us, this is easy and pleasant for everyone.

It is also pleasant because the ultimate reality known through it is unchanging. Furthermore, it is indisputable, leaving no room for conflicting perspectives. It is the subject of universally accepted experience! Its indisputability stems from its non-contradictory nature; it doesn't contradict anything else. This is the philosophy that allows for no contradiction!

As Gaudapadacharya describes in this verse, we must all understand, through hearing, reflection and contemplation, whether the knowledge of reality he presents is unobstructed and all-pervading, universally accepted, and pleasant and beneficial to all by testing it on the touchstone of experience (*anubhava*). We must recognize that Shankaracharya, who wrote the commentary on Gaudapada's Karika, belongs to this tradition, and his teachings rest on the foundation of such a philosophy.

The Vedanta spoken by Shankaracharya is applicable to the lives of all of us. Vedanta does not seek some other knowledge that is separate from our professions, occupations, etc., and more external than them. Whatever profession we may follow in practice, just as breathing is naturally an unavoidable and essential nature for all beings, Vedanta is the most natural and essential happiness inquiry for our lives. There is no one arguing that Self-knowledge (Atma-Jnana) is not needed. About the Self, that is the subject of our own inherent nature, we may each have a different opinion; however it may be, knowledge of Self is dear to us, the Self is the most dear. Shankaracharya emphasizes that the true knowledge of the Self is the means to the Summum Bonum of life (Purushartha). All the philosophical thinkers and religious teachers in the world have to come to this self contemplation in one way or another. In the present era, out of curiosity, admiration, or the intention to refute its flaws, a large number of writers, seekers, and critics examine

Shankaracharya's philosophy. Common people, knowingly or unknowingly, engage in this discussion. If one grasps any side dogmatically without properly contemplating the essence of the Self, it may lead to misfortune. However, if one carefully examines it and arrives at a universally acceptable conclusion, then achieving the ultimate goal of life is possible, as the Acharya-s have stated.

As mentioned previously, Shankaracharya states that all his teachings are based on Vedanta. What is Vedanta? It means "the end of the Vedas." Since the Upanishads are largely the final part of the Vedas, they are called Vedanta. The doctrine contained in the Upanishads is called Vedanta because it determines the ultimate meaning of the Vedas. Someone might doubt, "Not everyone accepts the Vedas as authority! How can the Vedanta doctrine contained therein be universally accepted?" But the Acharyas do not say that the Vedas are authoritative simply because they are statements of the Vedas. If they had said so, someone could have said that the statement of the Vedas is not acceptable to us. Authority means that which reveals the truth in such a way that neither doubt nor delusion arises. The Vedas, especially Vedanta, are authoritative precisely because they reveal the unknown reality as it is, without causing doubt or contradiction. This, according to Acharya's view, can be tested on the touchstone of everyone's experience (*anubhava*). I will explain this further in the discussion of the authority of the scriptures (śāstra prāmāṇya). Thus, even in this way, the Acharya's teachings are universally accepted.

Now, some people consider Shankaracharya as just one individual and describe the good that came to the world through him, setting out to praise him. Others, explaining the harm that has come to the world through his Māyāvāda, Saṃnyāsa, etc., are not only deriding him but also setting out to hate the followers of Shankara. This resembles an examiner giving marks without examining the students, or a judge imposing punishment upon accusation without due consideration. Firstly, who Shankaracharya truly is remains unsettled, and secondly, his definitive teachings are unknown to many. Then to worship or insult a person imagined by oneself is a common form of self-deception, and also deception of others, in criticizing or defending Shankaracharya. Truly, Shankaracharya's manifest form available to us is only the commentaries written by him; we have to find his true teachings in those texts. The appropriateness of universally accepting Shankaracharya's teachings can only be decided after reading these books, contemplating them, and discussing them among those who know them. If they are truly universally accepted and conducive to puruṣārtha, let us worship the Acharya with gratitude; if not, let us ignore and forget them. Tomorrow I will discuss the subject of the original texts of Vedanta Darshana, which Shankaracharya has taken as the basis for doing this work with devotion and respect.

2. Vedanta Prasthānas

(31-7-53)

I have stated that Vedanta is the basis for Shankaracharya's philosophical investigations. The word Vedanta refers to the Upanishads - the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras - and to the philosophy (*darśana)* found in them. Since a detailed biography of Shankaracharya is unavailable, we must ascertain the truth of his Vedantic thoughts from his commentaries. Therefore, the meaning of the statement "Sarva Sammata Upadesha" (Universally Accepted Teachings) of Shankaracharya should be understood as the universally accepted ideas of the Upanishads, the Gita, and the Brahma

Sutras. Consequently, discussing these original texts is now essential. Every seeker has the right to reflect on these ideas until the subject matter becomes firm in their experience (anubhava), enabling them to understand what is universally accepted. Moreover, since the subject of Vedanta is consideration of one's own *Ātmasvarūpa* (true nature of the self), it is the duty of every qualified seeker (*adhikāri*) who desires welfare (*śreyas*) to strive to bring it into their experience.

The collection of texts that Shankaracharya has placed as the source of his stream of thought may be viewed as a confluence of three live rivers of knowledge (*jīva nadī-s*). The Upanishads, the Gita, and the Brahma Sutras expound the same truth (*Tattva*) of Vedanta from three different perspectives. All these three texts are setting out to teach the truth. Since these originate from three different directions, they are called *Prasthanas*. The word "Prasthana" means to depart. Even now, there is a practice of calling it "Prasthana" to depart and stay in a place nearby the day before if an auspicious moment (*śubhamuhūrta*) full of all qualities is not available on the day of departure. Many of you may remember the part in the Bhārata describing the great journey of the Pandavas leaving the kingdom, which is named 'Mahāprasthānaparva'. Be that so, among Vedāntins, there is a practice of calling the Upanishads Śruti Prasthāna, the Gita Smṛti Prasthāna, and the Brahma Sutras Nyāya Prasthāna.

Among these three, the Vedāntas, or Upanishads or the Śruti Prasthāna, are the original sources. The philosophy contained within them is known as Vedānta because they contain the original source. What are the Upanishads? (*Upa-ni)* Taking one near to the Supreme Self, they (ṣad) destroy ignorance and other misfortunes. *Ātmavidyā* (knowledge of the self) eliminates ignorance, desire, etc., which cause of *samsāra* (cycle of birth and death), thereby destroying the succession of misfortunes; it takes us near the Supreme Self and enables us to reside in the nature of bliss itself; therefore, Brahmavidyā (knowledge of Brahman), that is, the supreme knowledge of the Supreme Self, is the Upanishad. The collection of texts containing these Upanishad teachings is also called Upanishad. The Upanishad Grantha (text) is not a material book, but here, the Vedic section consisting of the collection of śabda-s (words and meanings) is called the Upanishad. The correct knowledge of the subject of *Ātmā* (Self) that is stated in the Upanishads is *Vidyā* (knowledge); not knowing it, having a doubtful understanding, or knowing it wrongly – all these are *Avidyā* (ignorance). Moreover, any knowledge of a subject other than the Ātmā, whether it is wrong knowledge or correct knowledge, is regarded as Avidyā by Vedāntins from this perspective.

How Do the Upaniṣads Reveal Brahmavidyā?

How exactly do the Upaniṣads produce *brahmavidyā*, the knowledge of Brahman? How does this knowledge arise in us through the sentences of Vedānta? These questions must be addressed, at least briefly, for they offer an initial glimpse into the method and significance of the *Vedāntaprasthāna*—the scriptural foundation of the Vedānta tradition.

To begin with, it is crucial to understand that the Upaniṣads do not arrive at their subject matter through syllogistic reasoning or formal logic. Their teachings are not established by argumentation in the manner of philosophical treatises. As a result, their true meaning may remain veiled to those who approach them solely through the lens of rational intellect, unaided by śraddhā (deep trust) or inner receptivity.

Modern minds, influenced by historical methods of inquiry, often raise questions: *When were the Upaniṣads composed? Who were their authors? Under what historical circumstances did they arise?* But such questions, though perhaps valid from a scholarly perspective, are beside the point when viewed from within the tradition itself.

In the view of the theistic (*āstika*) sages of this land, the Upaniṣads are *not paurūṣeya granthas*—they are not works of human authorship. They were not composed by individuals in the manner of Kālidāsa composing his *Raghuvaṃśa* or other poets crafting epics and lyrics. Rather, the Upaniṣads are *revealed texts* (*śruti*), not the creations of human minds but discoveries made by the seers (*ṛṣis*) in moments of deepest insight.

Moreover, the Upaniṣads are not independent compositions. They are, for the most part, embedded within the *Āraṇyakas*, themselves forming part of the *Brāhmaṇa* literature of the Vedas. It is because they appear as the concluding sections of the Vedic corpus that they are called *Vedānta*—the “end of the Vedas,” both in position and in culmination of purpose. This point has already been noted earlier.

Thus, since the Upanishads are part of the Vedas, they are also considered eternal (*anādi*), like the other parts of the Vedas in the view of the Vedāntins. The Vedas are eternal, and the sages (*Ṛṣis*) obtained them through the power of their penance (*tapas*), and from them, they have come down to us through the tradition of teacher-disciple through the process of study (*adhyayana*) - this is the statement of the Vedic people. "*yajñena vācaḥ padavīyamāyan tāmanvavinsan ṛṣiṣu praviṣṭām" (Ṛgveda Saṃhitā. 10-071-3)* - by citing such Vedic statements, some of you may have heard arguments proving that the Vedas are eternal. In Mokṣadharma, there is this verse:

“*yugānte’narhitān vedān setihāsān maharṣayaḥ | lebhire tapasā pūrvamanujñātāḥ svayambhuvā ||” (Mokṣa. Dh. 210-19*)

The meaning of the verse: At the end of the *yuga* (cosmic epoch), the great *Ṛṣis*, having been authorized by *Svayambhū* (Brahmā), once again recovered the Vedas along with the Itihāsas through their t*apas* (austerities). Ṛṣis are those who have discovered the Vedic *mantras* (hymns) through penance; they have not independently composed them. Neither the Vedas nor the meaning of the Vedas is apparent to the intellect of ordinary people; it is only revealed to great people like the Ṛṣis who, with single-minded devotion to the Supreme Self, meditate and have a pure heart - this is the secret that lies in this belief.

Therefore, the opinion expressed in the Śrutis should be grasped by a heart that has been refined by austerities (*tapas*)in the form of faith and devotion (*śraddhābhakti**), meditation, etc.; it is clear that it should come from one such heart to another heart. For this reason, one should not try to grasp the Upanishad with logical intellect. Can one scoop up the sunlight or light with a ladle? What is stated in the Upanishad must be assimilated into experience through the heart. We should not forget the principle that for music to appeal, the listener's sense of hearing and mind must possess a certain degree of purity and refinement (*samskāra*). A musical performance requires instruments and vocals to reach a harmonious pitch. Similarly, grasping good music and experiencing joy necessitates refined ears and mind. A musician attuned to musical notes and rhythms (*svaras-, tāla-s*) comprehends a melodic mode (*raga)* only through an elevated sense of hearing. Likewise, only a person who has internalized Vedantic teachings into his own heartfelt experience can convey it to others; only a person with a refined heart can understand the teachings.

The Upanishads, unlike geometry or logic, do not establish truths through deductive reasoning (with assumptions, theorems, and proofs) but keep revealing the experienceable reality the way It is.

A crucial point regarding Upanishadic texts: while *Upanishad* means *Brahma-Vidya* (knowledge of Brahman), not all texts bearing that name exclusively discuss it. Many delve into sandalwood paste (*gopichandana)*, sacred beads (*Rudraksha*), sacred ash (*Bhasma)*, geometric diagrams (*yantras*), sacred chants (*mantras*), and expositions of renunciation (Sanyasa), Yoga etc. Therefore, Sri Shankaracharya's *Śruti Prasthana* (the texts forming the basis of Vedanta) includes only the ten famous Upanishads he commented on, and two or three others frequently cited in those commentaries. Those aspects of the other Upanishads which are not contradicted in the main ten Upanishads are also accepted.

Within the Upanishads, Brahman, the ultimate reality, is identified as the Self in each of us, which is indeed all these (universe). The experience that we are not limited and we are not mere *samsāris* (worldly beings) bound by sensory experiences of happiness and sorrow, will result for “everyone” who assimilates this teaching. Thus, it rightfully deserves the title of “**Universally Accepted Teachings**.” Shankara's view is based on a verse from the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (1.4.10)

brahmavā idamagra āsīttadātmānamevāvet | ahaṃ brahmāsmīti | tasmāt tatsarvamabhavat | tadyo yo devānāṃ pratya-budhyata sa eva tadabhavattatharṣīṇāṃ tathā manuṣyāṇāṃ tadaitat paśyan ṛṣirvāmadevaḥ pratipede'haṃ manurabhavaṃ sūryaśveti | tadidamatarhi ya evaṃ vedāhaṃ brahmāsmīti sa idaṃ sarvaṃ bhavati tasya ha na devāśca nābhūtyā īśate ||

[Translation: In the beginning, this [universe] was indeed Brahman alone. It realized itself as Ātman and declared, “I am Brahman.” As a result, it became all that exists. Whoever among the gods realized this became that (Brahman). Likewise, the sages and humans who awakened to this truth became that. Seeing this, the sage Vāmadeva declared, “I was Manu, I was Sūrya.” Thus, even now, whoever knows “I am Brahman” becomes all this [universe]. For such a knower, neither gods nor any other being can prevent this realization.]

The Attainment of Universal Selfhood:

Brahman is the Self (*ātman*) of all. Whoever realizes *“Aham̐ Brahmasmi”*—"I am Brahman"—attains the state of universal Selfhood (*sarvātmatva*), realizing *“Idam̐ sarvam aham eva”*—"I alone am all this."

The *śruti* declares that the gods (*devatā*) possess unobstructed sovereignty (*apratihata-aiśvarya*). Yet, even they remain limited (*paricchinna*) by their divine forms. Among them, whoever attains the knowledge *“I am Brahman”* transcends these limitations and realizes universal Selfhood (*sarvātmatva*). Those among the gods who have realized this knowledge (*jñāna*) attain the same supreme state.

Likewise, among the sages (*ṛṣi*), those who gain Vedāntic knowledge (*vedānta-jñāna*) alone attain this realization of universal Selfhood.

The Limitation of the Sages and the Uniqueness of Self-Knowledge:

The sages (*ṛṣi*) were the ones who discovered the means to attaining happiness through the worship (*ārādhana*) of the gods (*devatā*). Through the power of their austerities (*tapas-prabhāva*), they uncovered the principles (*tattva*) of karma and upāsanā. They attained various supernatural powers (*siddhi*), but what of it? They too were bound by limitation (*paricchinna-svarūpa*). Among them, only the one who realized *"Aham Brahma"*—"I am Brahman"—transcended all limitations and attained universal Selfhood. Thus, those sages who attained this knowledge (*jñāna*) alone realized their oneness with all.

Attainability of Brahman-Knowledge for Humans:

For human beings (*manuṣya*), this same realization leads to the fruit of universal Selfhood. Ordinary people (*sāmānya-manuṣya*) do not possess the same spiritual power as the sages (*ṛṣi*). They must follow the path laid out by the sages—engaging in karma and upāsanā—while striving for dharma, artha, and kāma. Naturally, their understanding remains limited (*paricchinna-buddhi*). Yet, even among them, whoever attains knowledge of Brahman as the Self (*brahmātma-jñāna*) realizes universal Selfhood (*sarvātmatva*), just as the sages did.

The Example of Sage Vāmadeva:

The sage Vāmadeva (*ṛṣi Vāmadeva*), through his realization of Brahman (*brahma-jñāna*), declared: *"Aham manur abhavam sūryaś ca"* (Ṛg Veda 4.26.1)
("I became Manu, I became the Sun.") Great and powerful sages (*mahāvīrya-ṛṣi*) like Vāmadeva attained this realization in ancient times. But can we, who are of lesser strength (*alpa-vīrya*), attain the same today? There is no reason to doubt this. Even now, whoever realizes *"Aham Brahma"*—"I am Brahman"—becomes *idam sarvam*—"all this." Even the gods (*devatā*) cannot obstruct such a knower from realizing universal Selfhood (*sarva-bhāva*). This is the essence of the passage from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.

Śaṅkarācārya's View on the Universality of This Knowledge:

I have explained Śaṅkarācārya's commentary on this verse. Other *ācāryas* have provided interpretations influenced by their own subjective experiences (*adhyātma-anubhava*). However, Śaṅkarācārya, adhering strictly to the meaning of the Vedic texts, affirms that the knowledge *"I am Brahman"* remains attainable even today. Thus, the realization of universal Selfhood (*sarvātmatva*) is not restricted to a bygone era—it is possible for all. Such a universally applicable teaching is not only intellectually engaging but also raises our aspiration. If Brahman-knowledge is attainable for us, and its fruit—universal Selfhood—is realizable by all, then we must not limit the meaning of *śruti* to narrow subjective experience. Instead, we should strive to acquire the necessary qualifications, pursue this knowledge, and realize its result. This concludes the discussion of the Upaniṣadic texts.

The Gītā as a Path of Spiritual Practice:

The second *prasthāna* (pillar of Vedānta) is the *Bhagavad Gītā Prasthāna*. If the Upaniṣads are known as *Siddhānta Prasthāna* (Treatise on Principles), the *Bhagavad Gītā* is *Sādhana Prasthāna* (Treatise on Practice). Numerous commentaries exist on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, including Śaṅkarācārya's, which categorize its teachings into *pravṛtti-dharma* (the path of action) and *nivṛtti-dharma* (the path of renunciation). As a

summary of the Upaniṣads, the *Gītā* is also considered a Vedantic means of knowledge (*veda-pramāṇa*).

While the Upanishads are extensive and challenging for ordinary people, the Gita distills the essence of Vedanta into seven hundred verses with simple language and clear subject matter division. The Upanishads primarily focus on principles, mentioning practices briefly, while the Gita emphasizes practices consistent with those principles. It addresses many questions. What is the relationship of *karma* and *upāsana* mentioned in the Vedas? From what doorway are they related to knowledge (*jñāna*), and what means do they provide? The specialty of the Gita is that it clearly explains these aspects and relates it to the established doctrine.

It also takes methods in other non-vedantic schools such as Sānkhya, Yoga etc., and adapts them to Vedānta. Śrī Śankarācārya has expressed this opinion by saying,

"*imaṃ dviprakāraṃ dharmaṃ niḥśreyasa prayojanaṃ paramārthatattvaṃ ca vāsudevākhyaṃ paraṃ brahma abhidheyabhūtaṃ viśeṣato'bhivyañcayata viśiṣṭa prayojanasambandhābhidheyavat Gītāśāstram*,"

meaning the Gītāśāstra, which distinctly reveals this twofold dharma—the ultimate means to niḥśreyasa (supreme liberation)—as well as the absolute reality (*paramārthatattva)*, which is the supreme Brahman known as Vāsudeva, is endowed with a unique connection between its purpose (*prayojana*), subject matter (*abhidheya)*, and means of exposition. By prescribing specific practices, this *prasthāna* makes knowledge accessible for everyone to experience, rendering the Gita Prasthana universally accepted.

Brahmasūtra for determining meaning:

Now, let us turn our minds towards the Brahmasūtra tradition. The Brahmasūtras primarily determine the meaning of Vedānta through reasoning. What is the true meaning conveyed by the various statements in the Upaniṣads? By what logic should we ascertain that a particular statement has a specific meaning? These questions are systematically analyzed and clarified in the Brahmasūtras.

Though the primary focus of this tradition is to determine the meaning of Vedānta vākya (scriptural statements of Vedānta), it also addresses crucial philosophical concerns: Does the Vedānta Siddhānta align with reasoning? If other philosophical doctrines contradict it, what reasons establish the superiority of Vedānta? What are the necessary means (sādhanas) for *Vedānta jñāna* (knowledge of Vedānta)? How should one understand their nature? Is the result (*phala)* of Vedānta jñāna eternal (*nitya*) or transient (*anitya*)? How should one properly comprehend it?

The Brahmasūtras address such questions in detail. This tradition accepts reasoning based on anubhava (direct experience) and worldly means of knowledge (*laukika pramāṇa-s*) as fundamental while rejecting fallacious arguments. How this is done will be explained further.

3. Empirical Means of Knowledge

(1-8-53)

There is no owner-owned (*svasvāmi)* relation between Śankarācārya and his teachings. The Ācārya never claimed these as his own teachings; he says, "These are in the Upaniṣads, explained and translated in the Gītā, and determined by reason in the Brahma Sūtras." So, does it seem as if Ācārya is just repeating what someone else said? - You might ask. That's not the case. Because Ācārya puts before us, "These are the teachings of Vedānta; these teachings are in accordance with experience." He asserts that this is the meaning of the Vedāntas, that is, of the Upaniṣads; and this meaning is consistent with all experiences. It is not wrong to call it his own, since this viewpoint has come to us through Śankara.

The Validity of the Upaniṣads as Means of Knowledge:

A recurring question arises: how can we be certain that the *Upaniṣads*, the *Gītā* which affirms and expounds them, and the *Brahmasūtras* which reconcile both with reason—are valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*)?

The answer, already indicated earlier, lies in a simple yet profound observation: these texts articulate a vision of reality that resonates with our deepest experience (*anubhava*). What indeed is a *pramāṇa*? It is that which produces *pramā*—valid knowledge—by evoking a recognition of what is true and unshakable. When the knowledge that arises from these texts is clear, uncontradicted, transformative, and universally affirmed by those who have grasped it, what else can we call it, if not *pramāṇa*?

Yet, to clarify this further, we can compare the Upaniṣads to the recognized means of knowledge in ordinary life. How do we come to know things in the world? Three principal methods emerge:

1. **Direct perception** (*pratyakṣa*)—seeing with one's own eyes, hearing, touching, tasting, or smelling.
2. **Inference** (*anumāna*)—concluding the presence of one thing from its known association with another.
3. **Verbal testimony** (*śabda*)—trusting the statement of a reliable source.

In *pratyakṣa*, the senses—eye, ear, nose, tongue, and skin—serve as instruments to grasp the form, sound, smell, taste, and touch of an object. When we see smoke billowing over a distant hill and infer the presence of fire, we engage in *anumāna*—inference. The rule “Where there is smoke, there must be fire” supports our conclusion. The initial perception is sensory; the subsequent knowledge is inferential. The sense organ that enables direct knowledge is *pratyakṣa-pramāṇa*, and the observed sign—smoke—is the basis for *anumāna-pramāṇa*.

Beyond these, there is *śabda*—the word of one who knows. When we accept that Buckingham Palace is in London, or that a war in Korea has ended, it is not because we have directly perceived these facts or deduced them through inference. We believe them because we trust reliable reports—news, journals, or the word of a friend. These, too, serve as instruments of knowledge. This is known as *āptavākya*—the statement of a trustworthy person.

Yet, even with all these means, our knowledge can sometimes be mistaken. Direct perception is subject to limitations—distance, nearness, or defects in the sense organ can distort what we see. A person with cataracts, for example, may misperceive. Inference,

too, can be flawed: someone with red eyes and a stick may be assumed to be angry, though he may simply be tired and joking. Likewise, verbal testimony loses its validity if the speaker is ignorant, dishonest, or unclear in expression.

Thus, these *pramāṇas* are said to have *svataḥ-prāmāṇya*—they are inherently capable of generating valid knowledge. Yet they are vulnerable to *parataḥ-aprāmāṇya*—external factors may invalidate them.

Now, given all this, how are we to trust that the Upaniṣads, vast and ancient as they are, convey correct knowledge? Who were the seers who perceived the *tattva* (truth) spoken of in them? When such questions arise, they are often prompted by a lingering trust in only *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*. But even these, we accept as valid only when they yield uncontradicted, self-consistent knowledge. Hence the adage: “Even what is directly perceived must be verified.” The same standard must be applied to the *śruti*. If the knowledge it reveals is uncontradicted, transforms the seeker, and aligns with deep experience—then it too must be honored as a valid *pramāṇa*.

The Question of Validity: Can the Subtle Be Known?

Even when relying on verbal testimony, we must be vigilant. Let us take an example. In earlier times, it was commonly believed that human beings could never reach the peaks of the Himalayas. "Divine beings dwell there," they said. "They prevent ordinary mortals from ascending." This belief gained strength because many failed in their attempts to scale Everest, and thus the general populace accepted these claims as credible. But with Tenzing Norgay’s successful ascent, that long-held notion crumbled. Those imagined guardians of Everest were powerless to stop him; the old testimony was rendered false.

This illustrates a key point: seeing and hearing are not the same. What is seen becomes truth; what is merely heard remains uncertain—perhaps true, perhaps false. Similarly, one may ask: are the statements of the Upaniṣads just such hearsay? Can they stand alone as *pramāṇa* (valid means of knowledge)? Does *śabda* (verbal testimony) not require support from other sources like perception (*pratyakṣa*) or inference (*anumāna*)? Is it not necessary that the one speaking has themselves directly seen what they describe?

From this line of doubt emerges a familiar objection: the *ātman* described in Vedānta is not perceptible through the senses; inference, too, must follow perception. So how can such unseen, transcendent realities be affirmed? Who has *seen* the truth these scriptures speak of?

But this skepticism rests upon a hidden assumption: that only what is sense-perceptible exists, or at least that what is not seen cannot be known. How valid is this principle? We must ask: on what basis do the objectors claim that everything real must be perceptible to the senses?

To demand that the *ātman*, which is *atīndriya* (beyond the senses), be established only through *pratyakṣa* is akin to the story of the foolish king who, upon hearing that *Ekādaśī* was approaching, ordered the city gates closed so it could not enter. Is it reasonable to apply the logic of gross perception to the subtlest of realities?

A certain householder had the habit of asking, "What kind?" for everything. If someone said there was a tree, he would ask, "What kind of tree?" If told a rich man had arrived, he

would ask, "What kind of rich man?" One day, while playing chess, his servant ran in, shouting, “Your son has been bitten by a snake!” Without lifting his gaze, he calmly replied, “What kind of snake?” Such misplaced questions arise when the questioner fails to consider the relevance or scope of the inquiry itself.

So too here. The demand that the Self be perceptible, or that Brahman be verified like fire on a mountain, overlooks the nature of the *tattva* in question. To press *pratyakṣa* or *anumāna* into domains where they were never meant to function is a category error.

Let us now reflect on the limitations of these *pramāṇas*. The senses can reveal only external objects, and even then, only one aspect at a time. The eye sees form, the ear hears sound, the skin feels touch. None perceives the whole. Take the case of a *dāsivāḷa* flower. The nose tells us it is fragrant, the eye tells us it is round and red—but what sense reveals the entire flower? None. Each instrument is like a soldier on guard, facing only one direction. The Creator has fashioned our senses with this inherent limitation.

And yet, we assume we know the whole object by assembling these partial glimpses. This is how the mind and intellect determine "what" a thing is. But these combinations, too, are prone to error. A village clerk once read a report where *palla* (one hundred *sēru* of grain) was misread as *khaṇḍuga* (two hundred), leading the district to assume a bumper harvest and send grain elsewhere—only to discover a shortage. Another time, an unimaginative astrologer, applying scriptural categories, identified a round, perforated object as a grinding stone, when it was something else entirely. These examples show how our conclusions, built upon fragmentary perception and assumption, often go astray.

Yet, even as we recognize the imperfection of our *pramāṇas*, a doubt remains: if our senses are so limited, how can we accept truths about subtle realities, such as *puṇya* (merit) and *pāpa* (demerit), which are said to yield fruits in other worlds? How can we have conviction in entities beyond sense and inference, as described in Vedānta? If perception fails to grasp them, and inference depends upon it, how do we know these are not merely religious fictions?

This is the point of tension. In the face of disagreement among religions and sects regarding *parokṣa-jñāna* (indirect knowledge), one might even wonder: Did the *ācāryas* simply *accept* these Vedantic ideas on faith—unverifiable, untestable—and build their teachings upon them? Such doubts, which are subtle yet persistent, demand resolution. And it is to this resolution that we now turn.

4. Vedantic teachings culminate in intuitive experience

(2-8-53)

Our earlier reflection established that all means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) fall into three broad categories: perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), and reliable testimony (*āptavacana*). Moreover, we observed that both inference and testimony ultimately depend upon perception. The senses, as instruments of direct knowledge, selectively grasp aspects of objects—form, sound, taste, and so on. The mind then compiles these fragments into what we call "direct knowledge." But even this so-called direct knowledge is prone to error, and our worldly experiences are replete with such mistaken conclusions.

The Absolute Reality (*paramārtha-tattva*), as spoken of by Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, is not accessible through these empirical means. It is graspable only through the words of

Vedānta. And yet, a persistent doubt remains: If the sentences of Vedānta are merely words, how can they reveal that which lies beyond the senses? Without relying on perception or inference, how can they function as *pramāṇa*—a valid means of knowledge?

This question strikes at the core of our inquiry.

The answer, according to Śaṅkara, lies in the unique function of *śabda-pramāṇa*. A sentence is a valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) when it generates an uncontradicted and coherent awareness (*pramā*). If the knowledge it produces is universally accepted and not refuted by other means, then there is no need to submit it to further logical scrutiny. The power of Vedāntic sentences does not lie in clever reasoning, but in their capacity to point directly to what is already inwardly evident—the Self.

Indeed, Śaṅkarācārya holds that the Self described in Vedānta is not merely an abstract construct, but directly present in one's experience. **Thus, its knowledge is not to be "proven" through logic, but *recognized* in the quiet clarity of inner awareness.** "That which is beyond thought," says a traditional maxim, "must not be subjected to reasoning" (*acintyāḥ khalu ye bhāvā na tāṃstarkeṇa yojayet*). Reason, like the senses, must follow experience; it must not be used to deny it.

To dismiss what lies beyond the senses is to overlook even the most intimate facts of life. Pain, fear, hunger—though unmeasurable and subtle—are nonetheless undeniable. Just because something cannot be weighed or photographed does not make it unreal. The same holds true for the Self. The *Kaṭhopaniṣad* declares:

Na sandṛśe tiṣṭhati rūpam asya na cakṣuṣā paśyati kaścanainam | hṛdā manīṣā manasābhikḷpo ya etad vidur amṛtās te bhavanti (Ka. U. 1.2.23)
"He is not seen by the eye, nor is His form grasped. He is known by the purified intellect (*manīṣā*), with the heart, by the mind. Those who know Him become immortal."

The import of this verse is clear: The *Ātman* has no form, no sound, no taste or touch. It cannot be grasped by the senses. Nor is it an object of inference or even of testimony in the ordinary sense. The mind, habituated to grasping external things, must turn inward. When its wanderings cease, the Self is discovered not through sensation, but through subtle discernment—*manīṣā*, the deep, contemplative intellect.

According to Śaṅkara, this inner turning—this inward seeing—is the essence of Vedānta. The Self, though imperceptible to the senses, becomes evident when the mind quiets. One does not "acquire" the Self; one *uncovers* what has always been present. Therefore, Vedānta does not suggest rejecting the empirical means of knowledge, but rather transcending them when seeking the ultimate truth—the *Ātman*, the Self within. What truly is lost by abandoning all that is external and turning within?

We need not fear becoming like the misguided nose-severed-seeker, *Mūguharaka Dāsaiyya,* who in his desperation to see the invisible Lord Nārāyaṇa, suggested cutting off one's nose. Let us not be so literal-minded as to believe that every experience must arise through a particular sensory channel. Just as we have progressed from bullock carts to trains and planes, should we not also accept that there might be a more direct way of knowing—an immediate apprehension of the Self through pure awareness?

This *ātma-anubhava*—the direct intuitive recognition of the Self—is not the privilege of any caste or *āśrama*. It is universal, accessible to all. Likewise, the Bhagavad Gītā, which

harmonizes with the Upaniṣads and presents this realization in a form available to all, is considered authoritative. However, no traditional Vedāntin considers the Gītā a self-standing *pramāṇa*. Being of human authorship, it is classified as *smṛti*—a secondary authority. It must be interpreted in accordance with *śruti* (the revealed Veda), and its insights are to be upheld only to the extent that they are consistent with both revelation and one's own deepest experience. The Mīmāṁsakas, too, maintain this: *Smṛti* must not contradict *śruti*.

On the Structure and Intent of the Gītā:

Modern scholars often speculate about the concluding phrase found at the end of each chapter of the *Gītā*—"*Bhagavadgītāsu Upaniṣatsu*." Some suggest it signals the *Gītā*'s intrinsic affiliation with the Upaniṣads, while others raise doubts regarding its origin. However, such phrases have long served as conventional chapter markers and are not unique to the *Gītā*. Significantly, none of the major *ācāryas* have devoted commentary to this particular phrase, indicating that it was not considered central to the interpretation of the text.

Another oft-discussed phrase, *"Brahmavidyāyāṁ Yogaśāstre,"* invites a range of interpretations. Some claim the *Gītā* advocates only the *jñānayoga* (path of knowledge); others argue for its exclusive focus on *karmayoga* (path of action), while yet others see action as subsumed under Brahmavidyā. But the *Gītā* itself provides decisive clarity:

> *loke'smin dvividhā niṣṭhā purā proktā mayānagha |*
> *jñānayogena sāṅkhyānāṁ karmayogena yoginām* (Gītā 3.3)
> "In this world, a twofold path was declared by Me in ancient times, O sinless one—jñānayoga for the contemplative and karmayoga for the active."

Thus, any attempt to reduce the *Gītā* to a single path, while ignoring such a clear declaration by Bhagavān Himself, is not tenable. The interpretation offered by the traditional *ācāryas*, which affirms that the *Gītā* presents both *pravṛttidharma* (the path of action) and *nivṛttidharma* (the path of renunciation) in harmony with the *Vedas*, stands as the most balanced and faithful to the text. This view also fosters unity between *śruti* and *smṛti*, and leads seekers to an intuitive comprehension of the Self—the inward light of the Upaniṣads. It is this *sampradāya*-rooted understanding that I place before you for reflection.

Why the Brahmasūtras?

A natural question arises: if the Upaniṣads already present the vision of the Self so directly, why did the need for the *Brahmasūtras* arise at all?

The answer lies in the variety of interpretations the Upaniṣadic sentences have invited. Their meaning often reflects the inner maturity (*adhikāra*) of the reader. This variation resembles the well-known parable: two travelers debated the color of a chameleon—one insisted it was red, the other swore it was yellow. A third, wiser observer, suggested they simply look again. Upon observation, they discovered the creature was green—and in constant flux. So too with Vedāntic inquiry. Each commentator, influenced by their predispositions, sees a different emphasis in the Upaniṣads. But to uncover the true and dynamic purport, a methodical and unbiased investigation is essential.

This is the task taken up by the *Brahmasūtras*, which initiate the inquiry into Brahman (*brahmajijñāsā*)—an inquiry grounded not in conjecture but in the *śruti* and supported by *anubhava* (direct experience). Unlike *dharmajijñāsā* (inquiry into duty), which relies solely on scriptural injunctions, *brahmajijñāsā* requires both scripture and lived insight. Śrī Śaṅkara says:

> *"na dharmajijñāsāyāmiva śrutyādaya eva pramāṇaṁ brahmajijñāsāyām | kiṁ tu śrutyādayo'nubhavādayaśca yathāsaṁbhavam iha pramāṇam."*
> "In *brahmajijñāsā*, unlike in *dharmajijñāsā*, not only the scriptures but also experience (*anubhava*), wherever appropriate, serve as means of knowledge."

Although portions of *brahmajñāna* involve discussion of karma and upāsanā directed toward results in other worlds, our present focus lies on that portion of the *Upaniṣads* which pertains to *here and now*—for it is that immediate self-knowledge which is most relevant to our inquiry.

Why We Must Be Methodical:

In our times, where life is scattered and hurried, few pause to contemplate the principles of Vedānta deeply. Instead, we often waste what little time we have in restless curiosity: "What is his opinion? What is ācārya's view?" Jumping from one interpretation to another, comparing fragments from fifty sources, we resemble the foolish man who, trying to dig a well, dug one foot each in fifty places—and found no water—whereas digging fifty feet in a single spot would have sufficed.

Thus, it is a blessing that you, dear seekers, are prepared to stay with one consistent stream of thought—over the next two months—to pursue this inquiry steadily. I shall follow the path illumined by Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, not out of blind allegiance, but because the *ācāryas* of this tradition assure us that Vedānta reveals not an abstraction but a living, experiential truth—accessible here and now. And whether the teaching which I claim deserves to be called "universally accepted"—you must be the judge.

5. Pramāṇakṛtya (Function of Means of Knowledge)

(Ganapati Temple, 3-8-53)

As discussed earlier, the Upaniṣads—along with the *Gītā* and *Brahmasūtras*, which uphold and elaborate their teachings—reveal truths accessible through intuitive experience (*anubhava*). For this reason, they must be accepted as valid sources of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). But this raises a broader question: what exactly is a *pramāṇa*, and how does it function?

The Anatomy of Valid Knowledge:

A *pramāṇa* is that which leads to *pramā*, or valid cognition. In other words, it is the extraordinary means by which right knowledge is produced. Though a knower (*pramātṛ*) is always involved in any knowing process, the knower is not the *instrument* of knowledge—they are the agent who uses the instrument, i.e., the *pramāṇa*.

Thus, we have:

- **Pramātṛ** – the knower, the subject
- **Pramāṇa** – the instrument by which knowledge is gained
- **Prameya** – the object of knowledge, the known
- **Pramiti** – the knowledge or cognition that arises

While other supporting factors like time, destiny, or inner clarity may assist in the arising of right knowledge, the direct cause is always the *pramāṇa*. These four terms are thus deeply intertwined in the process of valid knowledge.

In more conventional usage, however, people often employ related terms—*jñātṛ* (knower), *jñāna* (knowledge), *jñeya* (knowable), and *jñapti* (cognition)—without necessarily distinguishing between valid and invalid knowledge. We will sometimes follow this convention for the sake of smooth exposition, and the discerning reader must infer from context whether the reference is to *pramā* or merely to awareness in general.

Similarly, the word *jñāna* can either mean the *instrument* (the act or means of knowing) or the *result* (j*ñapti*, the cognition that arises). The precise sense must be understood from context.

What Does a Pramāṇa Actually Do?

Now comes the core question: what is the function of a *pramāṇa*? What does it do to make knowledge possible?

Scholars have debated this point. Two principal positions may be highlighted here.

The Mīmāṁsā View: Producing "Knowability":

According to the *Mīmāṁsakas*, the *pramāṇa* bestows the quality of "being known" (*jñātatva*) upon the object. That is, although the object may already exist, it is not yet "known" until it acquires this status through the operation of a *pramāṇa*. Just as a table remains unseen until the lamp's light falls upon it, the object becomes prameya—known—only when illumined by the light of knowledge.

So, for the *Mīmāṁsakas*, the *pramāṇa* acts upon the object, enabling it to attain the condition of being known. Knowledge, in this view, is about transforming the object into something that is now graspable.

The Vedāntic View: Dissolution of Ignorance:

The Vedāntins disagree. They argue that the *pramāṇa* does not need to act on the object or alter it in any way. The object already exists—it is not *unknown* because it lacks a certain quality, but because it is *obscured* by ignorance. The *pramāṇa*, then, simply removes that ignorance. When the veil lifts, the object appears to the knower.

To explain this, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, in his *Māṇḍūkya Bhāṣya*, offers a subtle analogy involving light and cutting:

> "For those who claim that knowledge of a pot is achieved by the *pramāṇa* independently of removing the darkness, it would be like saying that a blade cuts one limb of a tree without separating it from the other. But if the *pramāṇa* acts to distinguish the pot from its surrounding darkness, and its effect

> culminates solely in dispelling that darkness—just as a blade's action ends in separating the parts—then the knowledge of the pot is not an *additional* effect, but simply the natural result of the obstruction being lifted."

In other words, just as cutting a tree doesn't require the axe to act on each limb separately but simply to divide, the *pramāṇa* need only remove the obstruction (*avidyā*)—it doesn't need to generate a new state in the object. The function of *pramāṇa* is to merely distinguish between the ignorance and the object (*pramēya*) and thus remove our unwanted ignorance, and not to have further action on the object[2].

The Function of *Pramāṇa* and Its Scope:

It is well understood that a *pramāṇa* (valid means of knowledge) functions to differentiate between ignorance and the object of knowledge (*prameya*), thereby removing unnecessary ignorance. But does the *pramāṇa* operate directly upon the *prameya* itself? The commentary suggests that it does not extend to the object of knowledge, and this perspective warrants careful examination. This question is of particular importance because both *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* and *Vedānta* are concerned with the interpretation of the Vedic texts. The term *Mīmāṃsā* signifies revered contemplation (*pūjya-vicāra*), a necessary process for analyzing Vedic sentences to understand the essence of *karma* (ritual action), *upāsanā* (meditation), and *jñāna* (knowledge).

While the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsakas* primarily investigated the domain of Vedic *karma*, which has largely declined in practice today, their methodology for interpreting the Vedas remains a valid *śāstra*. Their system of determining meaning—through *śruti* (direct scriptural statement), *liṅga* (indirect implication), *prakaraṇa* (context), and other tools of exegesis—applies not only to the Vedas but also to *Dharmaśāstra* (the scriptures on righteousness).

Both the *Mīmāṃsakas* and *Vedāntins* agree that the meaning of a Vedic sentence must be determined by following this systematic approach.

The Distinction in Understanding Vedic Sentences:

In the interpretation of ordinary sentences, the speaker's intention plays a crucial role. However, in the case of the Vedas, this consideration is irrelevant since both schools accept that the Vedas are *apauruṣeya*—not authored by any human. Thus, if a Vedic statement is accepted as a *pramāṇa*, the key inquiry is how it generates knowledge and whether it acts directly upon its *prameya*. This requires deeper examination.

Even in everyday communication, a sentence gives a specific meaning independently, without needing to know the speaker's intention. However, we consider the speaker's opinion when they use words contrary to their intention due to inability or some other defect. Taking this into account is customary. For instance, a college professor once sparked controversy by calling Sanskrit a foreign language in a public gathering. Sanskrit scholars, concerned by this incorrect description, convened and passed a motion of censure. The professor attended the meeting, explaining, "I have no hatred towards

[2] If one claims that the object must be altered to be known, then one ends up imagining the *pramāṇa* as a causal force acting on the object—like saying that the axe not only separates the limbs of a log but must strike one of the limbs after the separation. But in Vedānta, knowledge is not the production of an attribute in the object; it is the cessation of non-apprehension. The object shines forth on its own, once ignorance is removed

Sanskrit; on the contrary, I have reverence for it. I did not use 'foreign language' with any malicious intent; my only opinion is that Kannadigas should use purely Kannada words." He defended his position. A Sanskrit scholar responded, "Since this gentleman has indicated his good intention and that he did not use the word 'foreign language' with evil intention, I think the assembly should not blame him. In a court of law, if it is known that the accused did not intend to commit the crime, his crime is not considered very great. However, the sentence he used that day has the meaning that this assembly determines, because Kannadigas consider Hindustani, English, and other languages as foreign languages!" The scholar's speech, eliciting laughter from the assembly, illustrates the principle that a sentence has a specific meaning determined by implications and cannot be arbitrarily altered by the speaker's opinion. If sentences have such independent meaning in the world, what more can be said about the Veda, which is *apauruṣeya*?

Therefore, Shankaracharya states: '*tasmāt vedaprāmāṇyasya avyabhicārāt tādarthye sati vākyasya tathātvam syāt | na tu puruṣamatikauśalam | na hi puruṣamatikauśalāt savitā rūpaṁ na prakāśayati | tathā vedavākyānyapi nānyārthāni bhavanti'* —"The Veda, without fail, conveys only one (intended) meaning; therefore, we must determine the meaning of the sentence. Human intellect and skill are of no use here. The sun does not reveal form because of the skill of human intellect, does it? Similarly, the Vedic sentences cannot be interpreted in another way." (*Bṛ. U.Bh. 3-3-1*).

The Function of Pramāṇa and the Role of Effort in Self-Knowledge:

The inquiry into *pramāṇakṛtya*—the function of the means of knowledge—is not merely a technical review of earlier Mīmāṃsaka doctrines with no present relevance. On the contrary, it strikes at the heart of an ongoing debate, even among Vedāntins. For though the Vedic sentence reveals the nature of the Self (*ātman*), many still assert that something more must be done beyond understanding the meaning of that sentence. They maintain that some additional effort is required to attain *ātmajñāna*—Self-knowledge..

To appreciate Śaṅkarācārya's view on this matter, one must first grasp how he conceives of *pramāṇakṛtya*, the proper function of a valid means of knowledge. According to the Ācārya, a Vedic sentence (*śruti-vākya*) is a *pramāṇa* only because it removes the *ajñāna*—the ignorance that obstructs the apprehension of its object. Once the ignorance is removed, the object—the Self—is seen to be ever-present, ever-evident, and need not be "produced" or brought about by any further activity.

For this reason, Ācārya emphatically holds that all that needs to be done is completed at the very moment the meaning of the sentence is understood. There is nothing further to do because the Self, being ever-real and ever-revealed, requires no further modification or transformation. He expresses this with great precision:

> *"Vākyārthajñāna-samakāla eva tu paryavasito bhavati, kevala śabda prakāśita arthajñāna-mātra-niṣṭhā-vyatiriktābhāvāt." (*Muṇḍaka Bhāṣya 1.1.6)
>
> "The culmination (*paryavasāna*) occurs at the very moment the meaning of the sentence is grasped, because there is no result other than the knowledge of the meaning revealed solely by the words."

Thus, according to Śaṅkara, the Vedic sentence is not merely suggestive or preparatory; it is itself *pramāṇa*. And when its meaning—"That Thou Art," for instance—is known by the

qualified seeker, that knowledge is itself the realization. There remains no separate action, no supplementary practice, and no experiential event that needs to follow. The knowledge is direct, complete, and liberating.

These represent two different processes, and we need to understand and experience them impartially. Does the light of a lamp only dispel the darkness hindering knowledge of the object, or does it also alter the object's nature? Consider this: We say, 'I saw an object.' Is this a change in the object or in the knower's knowledge? We must consider that, seeking the truth rather than advocating for a particular opinion. A story tells of rogues who convinced a king he was clothed in a very thin garment, and he walked naked in the street believing them. Although everyone remained silent out of respect, a boy exclaimed, "Hey, what is this? The Emperor has no clothes!" The king immediately realized he had been deceived. This fictional story illustrates the importance of grasping logic, even when spoken by a child; as the wise say, illogical statements, even from the deity Brahma, should be discarded like straw.
The Test of Scripture: Dispelling Ignorance through Self-Knowledge:

The primary function of scripture is to remove ignorance. If it is agreed that self-knowledge (*ātmajñāna*) arises merely through this removal—without the need for further ritual or auxiliary effort—then the objection, “Is there a flaw in the scripture itself?” loses its force. For what, after all, is the mark of a true *śāstra* (scriptural authority)? It is precisely this: that it removes ignorance and thereby reveals the reality that was previously concealed.

There is a telling story often shared in this context: An elderly blind woman once underwent eye treatment. The doctor who treated her, finding no one else in the house, began stealthily stealing her possessions—one item each day. Once the treatment was complete, the doctor approached the village elders demanding his fee. The woman, now able to see, addressed the council: “If this doctor truly gave me sight, then why am I unable to see the things that were always in my house?” At once, the deception was understood. Her restored vision was to be verified not by the operation itself, but by her ability to perceive what she previously could not.

In the same way, the removal of ignorance must result in direct self-knowledge. If a *śāstra* is truly a *pramāṇa* (means of valid knowledge), its authority is proven when, upon understanding its meaning, the truth of the Self (*ātman*) becomes evident.

Teachers who impart the true meaning of the Vedāntic sentence “*Aham Brahmāsmi*” (“I am Brahman”) in a manner that leads to direct insight into the Self are to be held in higher regard than those who merely instruct seekers to repeat the sentence like a mantra. The greatness of Vedānta lies in its capacity to destroy ignorance regarding the Self—not through mechanical repetition, but through the arising of knowledge. Those who affirm its *prāmāṇya* (validity) must communicate it in a way that leads to *anubhava*—intuitive realization. Likewise, those who seek to assess the authority of these statements must do so by aligning them with the criterion of experience.

6. Empirical and Vedic means of knowledge

(4-8-53, Umamaheshwara Temple)

Thus far, we have examined the nature and function of means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). An object of knowledge (*prameya*) is that which becomes the subject of valid cognition

(*pramā*) or true knowledge (*yathārtha-jñāna*). The *pramāṇa* does not introduce any new quality into its *prameya*; rather, it is considered authoritative solely because it removes ignorance related to its object. This is the position upheld by the *Ācārya*.

Means of knowledge can be broadly classified into two categories: Empirical (*laukika*) and Vedic (*vaidika*)

Empirical means of knowledge are essential for our worldly transactions.

- Direct knowledge obtained through the senses is called perception (*pratyakṣa*).
- That which enables inference and determination based on perceptual knowledge is inference (*anumāna*).

Though these two are fundamental, the words of reliable authorities (*āptavākya*) serve as the means to comprehend subtle matters beyond ordinary perception. Different philosophical schools enumerate the number of *pramāṇas* differently. However, it is reasonable to consider only these three—perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), and verbal testimony (*śabda*)—as primary, as agreed upon by *Śrī Madhvācārya* and the *Sāṃkhyas*.

Other means of knowledge, such as analogy (*upamāna*), presumption (*arthāpatti*), non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*) can, in some way, be subsumed under inference.

Regardless of these classifications, all empirical proofs (*laukika-pramāṇa*) ultimately function as evidence rooted in direct experience. These means of knowledge ascertain external objects and make them known; they reveal only matters of the external world.

On the other hand, Vedic means of knowledge (*vaidika-pramāṇa*) such as *śruti* reveal a reality that is beyond the reach of empirical *pramāṇas*, particularly the transcendental truth that is imperceptible to the senses.

Whether empirical or Vedic, all means of knowledge serve the purpose of generating knowledge of their respective *prameya*.

- Empirical means of knowledge remove ignorance regarding external, practical objects.
- Vedic means of knowledge remove ignorance concerning the inner reality, such as the Self (*Ātman*).

This distinction is made for the sake of clarity in inquiry.

The Fundamental Difference Between Empirical and Vedic Knowledge:

The key distinction between empirical and Vedic means of knowledge lies in their focus.

- Empirical knowledge is directed outward, investigating external objects.
- Vedic knowledge turns inward, investigating the nature of the knower (*pramāṭṛ*) himself.

In empirical knowledge, the transaction (*pramāṇa-vyavahāra*) naturally follows the pattern: *"I am the knower (pramāṭṛ), and I must understand this object of knowledge (prameya)."*

Here, the knower has no doubt about his own existence; hence, the inquiry is always directed toward the object.

The Inquiry into the Knower: A Distinctive Turn in Vedic Epistemology:

In the domain of Vedic knowledge, the inquiry takes a radical turn. It does not merely concern itself with understanding external objects, but instead shifts focus to the *knower*—the very subject who perceives. This inward turn is what makes the Vedic means of knowledge (*vaidika pramāṇa*) unique among all epistemic frameworks.

At first glance, it may seem inappropriate to inquire into the knower. After all, one assumes: "I am the knower; I am already established as such"—and this assumption serves adequately for ordinary worldly dealings. But for the seeker of truth (*tattva-jijñāsu*), such convenience must be set aside. The spirit of inquiry demands that nothing be accepted as established without examination.

What, then, is the essential nature (*svarūpa*) of the knower? Is the knower merely the one who applies proofs to objects and acquires knowledge, or is there a deeper nature—one that transcends this transactional role? This too must be examined. Just as railway clerks do not accept sealed parcels without inspecting the contents, we too must examine the contents of this assumed identity as the "knower" before proceeding.

At its simplest, the "knower" (*pramātṛ*) is one who knows. Prior to engaging in the act of knowing—before applying the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*)—this knower simply lacks knowledge of the object; he remains in a state of ignorance with respect to it. The desire to know arises only in relation to what is not yet known. Thus, the knower approaches knowledge to eliminate this ignorance.

But this ignorance manifests in three forms: the *absence* of knowledge (*jñānābhāva*), *doubtful* knowledge (*saṃśayajñāna*), and *false* knowledge (*mithyājñāna*). Of these, mere absence may not be particularly harmful. Doubt, however, obstructs decisiveness and hinders action. False knowledge, worse still, breeds arrogance—the conceit of being right—and leads to great harm in thought and action.

Hence the wise observation from the *Subhāṣita*:
"ajñaḥ sukham ārādhyaḥ sukhataram ārādhate viśeṣajñaḥ |
jñānalavadurvidagdhaṃ brahmāpi naraṃ na rañjayati ||"
— "A fool is easily pleased, a truly learned one even more so. But one who is conceited with partial knowledge—neither a fool nor a sage—even Brahmā cannot satisfy!"

Indeed, most of our troubles in life stem from *misunderstanding*. And a peculiar feature of misunderstanding is this: we realize it only *after* right understanding arises. Until then, the false appears true.

Let me share a simple story from personal experience. While traveling from Mysore to Holenarasipur, those who had come to send me off confidently seated me on a bench facing one side of the platform, saying, "Your train will stop on this side." I, thinking the Holenarasipur train would stop on the platform behind me, chose to trust their local knowledge. Soon, a train arrived bearing a signboard reading "Chamarajanagar." Upon seeing it, my friend exclaimed to the driver, "Please put up the Arasikere board!" It was then that I realized our mistake. I turned around—only to see the Holenarasipur train on the opposite platform, ready to depart!

Such is the nature of false knowledge: it creates confidence—but misleads until truth dawns. This illustrates the nature of false knowledge. It is easier to explain a real matter to children than to adults. Why is this? Children have no arrogance that their opinion is correct; as people grow older, this pride also grows. No matter how much humility one attains, the pride of being the knower never goes away. This misconception, however, must be dispelled by the teaching of Vedanta.

Turning Inward: The Inner Gaze of Vedānta:

The Vedantic *mahāvākya* does not introduce something new about the Self. No one doubts their own existence. What needs correction is not our awareness of *being*, but our assumption regarding *what* that being is. We instinctively take ourselves to be the knower who uses *pramāṇas* to know *prameyas*—as if we were fundamentally separate from what is to be known. This misconception arises because the senses, by their very design, are turned outward. As the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* declares:

"parāñci khāni vyatṛṇat svayambhūs tasmāt parāṅ paśyati nāntarātman |
kaścid dhīraḥ pratyag-ātmānam aikṣad āvṛtta-cakṣur amṛtatvam icchan ||" (Ka. 2.1.1)

“The Creator turned the senses outward; thus man sees only what is outside, and not the inner Self. Rare is the wise one who, desiring immortality, turns his gaze inward and beholds the Self.”

Because our senses constantly report on the external world, our attention is consumed by outward appearances. The craving for what lies outside turns us away from our own essence. In doing so, we forget to reflect upon who we truly are. But when such reflection occurs, the error of misidentification dissolves, and the Self reveals itself without effort. The truth, then, is not created—but uncovered.

This tendency to overlook the Self is not new. T. H. Green, in *Aids to Reflection*, remarked that many have not yet visited their own home—their very Self. Chidānandavadhūta, with striking clarity, voiced a similar sentiment: “You claim to know the Purāṇas, but you do not know your own *purāṇa*.” That is, we study the stories of gods and heroes, yet remain strangers to our own story.

What is the root cause of this ignorance in *ātma-vicāra*? Desire. The thirst for external objects blinds the inner eye. Yet the scriptures praise those rare, resolute individuals who, unfettered by this desire, turn their gaze inward. With senses withdrawn, they find the hidden radiance of the Self.

Swami Vivekananda put it succinctly: *“There is death in the senses.”* One who knows this truth no longer seeks fulfillment in the transient, but turns wholly toward the Self, the source of immortality.

Thus, the Upaniṣads—*śruti* par excellence—and the *Gītā* and *smṛti* that follow their vision, do not offer external objects of knowledge. Instead, they redirect us inward. They give us *antardṛṣṭi*, the inner gaze. By removing ignorance about the Self, they allow the Self to shine forth in its own light.

What is this *pratyagdṛṣṭi*, this inner seeing? It is not some physical reversal of the senses, nor an act of staring inward with the eyes closed. It is the withdrawal of attention from outer objects and the turning of the mind toward its own source. The Self is not an object

of the senses—it can only be *recognized* in the heart. As the *śruti* says, “He is known by the heart, by the intellect, by the mind…”—but only when the heart does not wander.

Vedāntic knowledge removes *avidyā*—but it also challenges the very notion of being a *pramātṛ*, a knower in the conventional sense. That presumed 'knower', who sets out to know the Self through means and instruments, is itself a construct born of ignorance. The knowledge arising from Vedānta exposes this subtle error. Thus, even the 'knower' must be unmasked.

But then, a further question arises: Are all who lack Vedāntic knowledge to be called ignorant? And what of the knowledge that others possess—can that be considered true knowledge? These are the questions we now turn to examine.

A complete response to this question will be given another time. For now, it is sufficient to understand this much: while others may possess knowledge about external, non-self objects, they harbor a fundamental misunderstanding about the Self. This erroneous understanding is the very cause of the suffering known as *saṃsāra*. For this reason, Vedāntins refer to it as *avidyā* (ignorance).

In recent times, much debate has arisen concerning the nature of *avidyā*. The indiscriminate use of technical terms such as *avidyā*, *mithyā* (falsehood), and *māyā* (illusion) by Vedānta teachers—often without a systematic approach—has only led to greater confusion among seekers.

Thus, the key questions that demand careful examination are: What is the notion of *avidyā* that is acceptable according to the *Ācārya*? How can the Self, which is of the nature of pure knowledge, have ignorance about itself? I will provide a detailed exploration of these questions in due course.

7. Ignorance removed by Vedantic knowledge

(5-8-53)

Thus far, we have explored the nature of *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge). A *pramāṇa* is revelatory, not causative — it does not introduce any new attribute into the object of knowledge (*prameya*). Instead, its function is to remove ignorance (*ajñāna*) related to the *prameya*.

Pramāṇas are broadly classified into two types:

1. Empirical (*laukika*) – Removes ignorance related to external objects.
2. Vedic (*vaidika*) – Removes ignorance concerning the inner Self (*pratyag-ātman*).

The *pratyag-ātman*—the innermost Self—is itself the 'knower' (*pramātṛ*), and paradoxically, this very sense of being the knower is a form of ignorance (*ajñāna*).

Ignorance (*ajñāna*) manifests in three ways:

1. Absence of knowledge (*jñānābhāva*) – A complete lack of understanding.
2. Doubt (*saṃśaya*) – Uncertainty about the truth.
3. False knowledge (*viparīta-jñāna*) – Erroneous understanding, such as mistaking the non-Self for the Self.

Since the very notion of *pramātṛtva* (being a knower) arises due to *ajñāna*, the role of Vedāntic *pramāṇa* is unique—it is not about acquiring new knowledge but about dispelling the fundamental ignorance that conceals the ever-present truth of the Self.

Knowledge itself often becomes a source of trouble. This is why Vedantic texts are considered authoritative: they dispel the false knowledge of "I am the knower" (*pramātṛ*). The trouble with this false knowledge is that it remains hidden until contradicted by correct understanding. As Shankaracharya says, "People, thinking 'I am the knower', naturally engage in worldly activities." This very understanding is what Vedantins call *avidyā* (ignorance).

A common question arises: *Why did this false knowledge (mithyājñāna) come into existence, and when?* However, this question is inherently flawed, for as the *Ācārya* (Śaṅkarācārya) states, *avidyā* exists naturally. Some critics argue that Śaṅkarācārya did not adequately address the cause of *avidyā* or *ajñāna* (ignorance), but this criticism itself stems from a misunderstanding of *avidyā*.

Every *śāstra* (discipline of knowledge) aims to dispel *avidyā* within its respective domain. Until knowledge of that subject arises, ignorance persists. Is it not true that the very purpose of a *śāstra* is to first recognize the presence of ignorance and then eliminate it? Physics, chemistry, and other material sciences serve to remove *ajñāna*—whether in the form of *jñānābhāva* (absence of knowledge), *saṃśaya* (doubt), or *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge)—concerning the nature of matter, energy, and the objects of study within those fields. If such ignorance did not exist, these *śāstras* would not be needed.

Similarly, Vedānta exists to remove ignorance regarding the Self (*ātman*). Just as it is natural to assume ignorance concerning any subject before its study, it follows that ignorance about the Self also exists prior to its realization. Therefore, the question *"When did ignorance about the Self arise, and from what cause?"* is illogical, because the very knowledge revealed by Vedānta eliminates this ignorance.

The Illusory Distinction Between Mūlāvidyā and Kāryāvidyā:

Some modern Vedāntins propose a distinction between two types of ignorance: i) *Kāryāvidyā* – Ignorance in the form of false knowledge (*mithyājñāna*), which they claim is an effect. ii) *Mūlāvidyā* – A so-called root ignorance, said to be its cause.

However, such a distinction appears to be nothing more than an intellectual construct. In ordinary experience, we do not seek a *cause* for false knowledge regarding external objects—false knowledge simply exists and is dispelled by correct knowledge. Why, then, should we seek a special cause for *avidyā* concerning the Self?

One might argue that *jñānābhāva* (absence of knowledge) itself is the cause of false knowledge. But is this absence a material cause (*upādāna-kāraṇa*) like clay is for a pot? Absence itself can never become a substantial cause. Hence, asking for a cause of *avidyā* in the context of the Self (*ātman*) is ultimately illogical. This issue, however, remains a subject of debate, and for now, we set aside this controversy.

The Distinction Between Ignorance of the *Anātman* and the *Ātman:*

There is a fundamental difference between the removal of ignorance concerning *anātman* (non-Self) and that concerning *ātman* (the Self).

Absence of knowledge (*jñānābhāva*) in itself is uniform—does the absence of a grain of millet differ from the absence of gold? The absence of one thing is no different from the absence of another, as absence itself has no substance. The difference lies in the objects themselves—millet and gold—not in their absence.

However, false knowledge (*mithyājñāna*) is not the same as absence. The significance of false knowledge is determined by the extent of harm it causes. In the world, removing one instance of false knowledge about an external object does not eliminate all other instances. Moreover, as knowledge expands, so too does our awareness of our prior ignorance.

Swami Vivekānanda once observed that if the means of acquiring happiness increase in arithmetic progression, suffering increases in geometric progression. That is, if happiness increases as 4, 6, 8, 10… in arithmetic progression, suffering increases as 4, 8, 16, 32… in geometric progression. This observation can be extended to knowledge and ignorance: as our knowledge of worldly matters expands, we become ever more aware of how much we do not know.

But knowledge of the Self (*ātmajñāna*) is entirely different. Unlike external knowledge, which multiplies both understanding and the recognition of ignorance, Self-Knowledge eliminates ignorance at its root.

The Upaniṣadic Teaching: "Knowing One, Everything is Known":

The Upaniṣads repeatedly pose the question: *"By knowing one thing, can everything be known?"* Vedānta responds affirmatively.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* conveys the same idea:

> *"Jñānaṁ te'haṁ sa-vijñānam idaṁ vakṣyāmy aśeṣataḥ*
> *Yaj jñātvā neha bhūyo'nyaj jñātavyam avaśiṣyate" (Gītā 7.2)*
>
> *"I shall explain to you in full this knowledge together with its realization, after knowing that nothing more here remains to be known."*

Thus, while knowledge of the external world is endless and ever-expanding, knowledge of the Self is singular and complete—its realization eliminates all ignorance, leaving nothing further to be known.

How Can One Thing Reveal All?

How can knowing one thing reveal everything? Is it not presumptuous to claim, as Vedāntins do, that knowledge of the Self is knowledge of all? This doubt arises only when the Vedāntic standpoint is misunderstood.

Their assertion does not imply that by learning one fact, all others become known in the empirical sense. Rather, it affirms that there is only one ultimate reality, which, through ignorance, appears as many. In truth, we are not confronting a diversity of fundamentally distinct realities, but varied appearances of the same substratum.

The pillar in the night:

Consider a simple illustration. On a dark night, a thief mistakes a pillar for a policeman, a policeman mistakes it for a thief, and a lover imagines it to be their beloved. Each projects their own fear, habit, or longing onto the same object. When light falls upon the pillar, the manifold illusions vanish. What remains is the single, unchanging pillar, which had appeared in multiple forms. Likewise, in the dream state, we witness numerous scenes—joyful and fearful, known and unknown—yet upon waking, we realize all those experiences arose within our own self.

So too, say the Vedāntins, does the one reality, Brahman, appear diversified through the lens of ignorance. The many names and forms are not ontologically separate; they are mere appearances upon the non-dual Self.

The Knower and the Known: Are They Real?

In this framework, the distinction between knowledge and ignorance arises only in relation to the concept of the 'knower'. Insentient objects such as a pillar neither know nor fail to know; they simply are. Vedānta holds that when Self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*) arises, the very sense of being a 'knower' is revealed to be a fiction, born of error.

This leads to a common logical objection: if the status of being the knower is false, who is it that knows it to be false? Must there not be another knower to negate the first?

This is akin to arguing, “He is not here because he is human,” while simultaneously admitting there are no humans present. The objection is ill-posed. If it is through direct experience that we discover the knower-status is born of ignorance, then logic has no standing to contradict it.

The Roots of Knowership: ‘I’ and ‘Mine’:

Let us now trace the genesis of the knower. Śaṅkarācārya explains this succinctly:

"dehendriyādiṣṭha-haṁmamābhimāna-rahitasya pramātṛtvānupapattau pramāṇapravṛttyanupapatteḥ"

—“Without identification with the body and senses as ‘I’ and ‘mine’, the notion of being a knower (*pramātṛ*) is not possible. Therefore, the activity of the means of knowledge also becomes inapplicable.”

The body is the basis for the operation of the senses. The senses are necessary for *pramāṇa*-based cognition. But for us to say “these are *my* senses,” the idea must already exist that the body is *I*. Thus, the whole edifice of direct perception and knowledge is founded upon this original misidentification—‘I am the body’, and ‘the senses are mine’.

The knower Is Not the Self:

So is this status of being the knower (*pramātṛ*) our true nature? Vedānta says no. It is not innate; it arises from error. Yet one might ask: “Do we not feel clearly that we are the body, and that the senses are ours?” Yes, but the appearance of something does not prove its truth. In dreams too, we accept a body and senses as real—but upon waking, we dismiss them as mere illusion.

Even from the standpoint of karma, the theory that this body has come to us for experiencing past results gives us some conceptual reassurance. But this too rests on an unexamined assumption—that we had a body in the past which truly belonged to us. On what grounds should we accept that? The continuity of the body, and the assumption of its belonging, are both unexamined beliefs. What we take to be 'ours' is not proven to be so.

Hence, *knowership*, the sense of being the knower, does not belong to the intrinsic nature (*svarūpa*) of the Self. It is born of *avidyā* (ignorance), and vanishes with knowledge. The status of the *pramāṭṛ* is no more than a projection. It has no foundation in the Self.

Does Experience Support This?

Still, one may ask: is there an experiential basis for denying the knower-status? Is there any lived state in which our association with the body seems absent?

Yes, there is such a state. When the body and its senses appear to vanish from our awareness—even if only for a time—we glimpse the truth that knowership is not essential to the Self.

This state, and its implications, we shall take up in detail tomorrow.

8. The status of being the knower is not part of our true nature

(6-8-53)

Man naturally assumes himself to be *pramāṭṛ*, the one who knows objects. He accumulates knowledge and gradually eliminates ignorance. Many believe acquiring knowledge and dominating nature is human nature. Physical science makes new discoveries and provides information, with the knower illuminating objects to understand their essence. The belief that being a knower is our nature fuels this pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, the question of whether being a knower is our true nature is unlikely to arise in those accustomed to direct perception.

We assume *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge) to be truthful, don't we? But where does this authority to determine and judge the essence of objects come from? There's no worldly answer. Imagine a resourceful man in government starting a new department, hiring staff, and defining its scope. He makes everyone register their rights and obligations. This story is well known in this area as the story of Mr. Gomaaji Ganesha. Who authorized Gomaji? No one questioned it, so the office functioned. However, a clever minister secretly asked, "Where is the written order granting this authority?" Then he had to reveal the truth! Similarly, as long as we assume knowership is natural, we keep questioning the means of knowledge for knowing various things. But when did this assumption gain the right to determine the truth behind the reality, and how did it happen? What basis do we have for assuming knowership is natural? This continues because we do not question it. Vedanta explains that ignorance is the root of all this. I discussed this yesterday.

Some might argue: Knowership is the power to know. The knower does not always need to know, but must have the ability to know when needed. A lecturer does not always lecture. Sometimes he assumes his function, other times not. So what is the objection to assuming that knowership is our true nature? One must contemplate this further. Even when

knowership is present, it is not always consistent. For example, our knowership now says it is ten o'clock at night, but in a dream, it says it is twelve noon. Which is authentic? A Chinese philosopher dreamt of being a butterfly. Upon waking, the thought arose: did the seeker of truth become a butterfly in a dream, or is the butterfly now a seeker of truth? How to resolve this? Can we say the knowership in both states is the same? Moreover, in a dream, we cannot experience or consider waking life, feeling instead that we are awake. So, what's the point of saying our present body and senses are naturally connected?

There's another decisive experience showing subjecthood is not our nature: deep sleep. In dreams, subjecthood appears temporarily, even if falsely. During the dream, we seem to have a relationship with cause and effect, resulting in the appearance of subjecthood. But deep sleep is different; there's no appearance of any instruments. No one denies the existence of deep sleep, or considers it an unnatural state. Sleep may come slowly or be limited for some, like those who work poorly, worry, or contemplate truth. But everyone experiences some deep sleep. Some economists view sleep as unnatural and suggest reducing it. In this era of increasing non-essential workers, if someone increases working hours...

Some might find this good. But none of us want to abandon sleep entirely. Those who can't sleep desire it through medicine or treatment. We know it provides bliss and healthy rest. Moreover, sleep is the natural rule of creation for all beings. Even philosophers believing knowership is our nature must enter deep sleep. Those who've experienced its rest will agree that knowership causes effort, and even without it, we remain in a natural state in deep sleep.

Why we lack awareness in deep sleep is explained by the *shruti* (scripture): "Y*a tan na paśyati paśyan vai tan na paśyati na hi draṣṭur dṛṣṭerviparilopo vidyate'vināśitvāt | na tu taddvitīyamasti tato'nyad vibhaktaṃ yat paśyet yadvā tan jihrati..." (Brh. 4-3-23...)* We lack awareness in deep sleep because there's no second object separate from our nature. If there were, we could see it. We cannot say we lack the power to see, because we experience deep sleep and report seeing nothing. In that state, nothing is distinct from us: body, senses, objects – all are inseparable from our nature. Therefore, we see, hear, and know nothing.

A doubt may arise: We have knowership in the waking state, but not in deep sleep. Should we conclude that lacking knowership is our nature, and having it is unnatural?

Why do Vedāntins assert that the status of *pramāṭṛtva*—being the knower—is not the true nature of the Self (*ātman*)? The reason is quite straightforward: that which is essential to our nature can never be absent from us. Fire does not lose its heat; the sun does not cease to shine. If *knowership* were truly inherent to the Self, it would remain uninterrupted across all states of experience.

But we all know that in deep sleep (*suṣupti*), there is no experience of being a knower. One who wakes up says, "I slept well; I did not know anything." That statement testifies to the absence of *pramāṭṛtva* during sleep. Hence, what is absent in one state but appears in another cannot be intrinsic. It must be incidental—produced by conditions.

The Analogy of Reflection and Illusion:

The Upaniṣadic thinkers offer elegant analogies to illustrate this. The sun's reflection is seen in a body of water, but when the water dries up, the reflection vanishes. Clearly, the reflection is not part of the sun's nature—it depends entirely on the reflecting medium. Similarly, a stick immersed in water appears bent, but once taken out, it is seen to be straight. The bend was never truly in the stick; it was an appearance generated by the medium.

In the same way, *knowership*—the sense of being the cognizer—arises only when the body, senses, and mind are active. In deep sleep, when all these adjuncts (*upādhis*) are inactive, the sense of being a knower disappears. That which disappears under certain conditions cannot be *svabhāva*—the essential nature of the Self.

The Unchanging Witness:

What, then, remains across all states? What sees the waking state? What remains present even in deep sleep and illumines the absence of experiences there? That is *cit*, pure consciousness—self-revealing, unchanging, and unattached. The very power by which we know that we slept, and the power by which we experience the waking world, is the same. That is our true nature—not the transient role of 'knower', but the silent witness (*sākṣī*) of all cognition.

Knowership, therefore, is but a guise—an assumed identity arising from conditions, like the false teeth and painted faces worn by actors in a drama or the disguise used by thieves to mislead their victims. It appears for a time, plays its role, and disappears. The Self itself remains ever untouched.

Thus, *pramātṛtva* is not the *svarūpa* of the Self; it is a superimposed condition, dispelled upon proper inquiry. What remains after its removal is the true Self—pure awareness, ever-present, ever-free

The argument that knowership in the waking state implies it's our nature is mere dry logic. The experience of deep sleep reveals its absence from our nature. Therefore, we must correct this logic contrary to experience.

An oil mill owner had tied a bell to his ox and would whip it if the bell stopped. A logician remarked, "Couldn't the bell sound even if the ox stood still and moved its neck? Do you think the ox did not move forward when you were outside?"

"How do you decide?" When asked, he replied, "Swami, our ox has not learned as much logic as you have!" So he answered! It is said that animals also know the logic of the form of agreement and difference (*anvaya vyatireka*)! Just as the argument of that logician is contrary to experience, so too, we should not respect the present argument since it is contrary to experience. That chaitanya (consciousness) alone is our true nature with which we experience deep sleep and wakefulness.

The states come and go; the *ākāśa* (space) of the Self remains as it is. The sun, staying in the sky, spreads its light everywhere. We say that when a snake comes out of a hole, the sun illuminates it; and when the snake goes back into the hole, we say that the sun does not illuminate the snake now. Isn't it so? Coming out, going back into the hole - by the mere performance of these actions by the snake, there is no increase or decrease in the nature of the sun. Similarly, waking up comes and goes; dreaming comes and goes; deep

sleep comes and goes - from these āgamāpāya (coming and going), there is no increase or decrease in our essential nature of chaitanya. Therefore, that chidākāśa (space of consciousness) is our nature; it is said that the knowership that appears only in waking is not our nature. We shall discuss further about this nature of *cit* (consciousness) tomorrow.

9. Logic and Experience

(7-8-53)

It has been said that *Vedānta-vākya*—the great statements of Vedānta—removes the ignorance that lies at the root of all empirical transactions (*vyavahāra*). What are these transactions? They are built upon the assumptions that knowership (*pramātṛtva*), doership (*kartṛtva*), and enjoyership (*bhoktṛtva*) are natural to us. In all ordinary dealings—whether knowing, speaking, or acting—these assumptions function implicitly.

Consider a simple example: you see a mango hanging from a distant tree. Motivated by the desire to taste it, you walk toward the tree, strike the fruit down with a stone, check its ripeness, cut it open, and eat it. In all of this, you implicitly take the body to be 'I', the senses to be 'mine', and the desire and action to belong to a conscious agent—yourself. This entire transactional sequence rests upon the unquestioned assumption that *I am the knower*, *I am the doer*, and *I am the enjoyer*. This is so common and widespread that no one usually doubts it.

Yet, Vedānta calls this very understanding *avidyā*—ignorance—because it is based not on insight into *paramārtha* (ultimate reality), but on unexamined presumption.

A Common Objection: Will Inquiry Disrupt Daily Life?

Now, some may raise a practical concern: "If this foundational understanding is shaken, will not all transactions collapse? Will people become passive, lazy, indifferent to duties and responsibilities?" Some object to Vedānta on these very grounds, fearing social and moral disorder.

But such fear is unfounded. When one understands the true nature of the transactional world, one no longer becomes enslaved to it. Rather than eroding the basis of action, this insight grants clarity and freedom. One who knows that a thief is, in fact, a thief, no longer fears him; on the contrary, he may even win him over with wisdom. Similarly, one who understands the falsehood of *pramātṛtva*—who sees it for what it is—engages in the world without delusion or bondage. The discovery of truth does not cause collapse; it brings freedom and deeper harmony.

A Clarification Through Analogy:

Another objection follows: "If knowership is not the Self's nature, why does it return in the waking state? Doesn't this show that it is innate?"

This argument is logically compelling but stands contradicted by the universal experience of *suṣupti*—deep sleep. One's true nature, if it is indeed unchanging, must remain present even when all activity ceases. Consider a play: the company's owner, acting as a servant on stage, is still the owner. His essential status has not changed—only his appearance has. Similarly, the consciousness that remains untouched in deep sleep appears as the

knower in waking only due to association with the body, senses, and mind. Therefore, *pramātṛtva* is but a role, not our real nature. The logic that suggests otherwise is resolved by this deeper experiential fact.

A Subtle Doubt: Is Knowership Hidden in Deep Sleep?

At the close of yesterday's discussion, a thoughtful listener posed a nuanced question: "We seem to remember upon waking, 'I did not know anything in deep sleep.' Doesn't this imply that *knowership* existed in some latent or in an unmanifest form even during deep sleep? If there were no knowing subject there, how could such a memory arise?"

Some may argue, "You are simply dismissing logic that contradicts your view, while insisting we accept your reasoning instead. On what basis can that be accepted?"

Logic and the Limits of Pramāṇa:

It is not our view that logic (*tarka*) must be entirely rejected. Logic has a necessary and legitimate place in the discernment and verification of *pramāṇa* (valid means of knowledge). While *pramāṇa* yields correct knowledge, errors may still arise from other interfering factors. For instance, due to impaired vision, the numeral "3" might appear as "5" or "8." In such situations, logic is indispensable for judging whether the knowledge gained through that perception is indeed valid.

Consider the classic example: something seen from a distance appears to be a snake. To verify it, we might throw a stone at it. If it is a real snake, it may react; if not, we take a lamp and go closer. Ultimately, we may discover that it is just a rope. Similarly, when we infer the presence of fire upon seeing smoke on a hill, someone may object: "Can there not be smoke without fire?" We then reason: "If smoke could exist without fire, we should observe smoke in places entirely devoid of fire. But we do not."

Hence, inference supported by sound logic is accepted as a valid *pramāṇa*. This is how logic helps ensure the integrity of our instruments of knowledge. However, it is not correct to oppose direct and assured experience (*niścita anubhava*) with abstract logic. Logic that contradicts lived experience becomes *kutarka* (specious reasoning).

In the present context, our assured experience tells us that knowership (*pramātṛtva*) is entirely absent during deep sleep. This is true for everyone, across all times. It is inconceivable to suggest that some individuals might retain knowership in deep sleep. Given this universal experience, the argument that knowership must still exist in deep sleep because we remember having "known nothing" upon waking must be regarded as a misplaced reliance on logic. What gives such logic the authority to override a universally evident experience? Since this reasoning contradicts direct experience, we must assume that the fault lies in the logic itself.

Both waking and sleeping are experienced by us equally.. There is no reason to privilege the waking state's memory over the immediate and assured experience of dreamless sleep. Moreover, if knowership truly existed in deep sleep, someone, at some time, ought to have discovered it therein. But no such testimony exists.

The Nature of Deep Sleep:

The Upaniṣad declares: “*Yatra supto na kaṁcana kāmaṁ kāmayate na kaṁcana svapnaṁ paśyati tat suṣuptaṁ*” (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 5) — "That is deep sleep in which one does not desire any object, nor sees any dream." Sleep is of two kinds: dream sleep and deep sleep. In dream sleep, subtle objects are perceived; in deep sleep, neither desire nor dream remains. Knowership requires a second object to be present for cognition to arise. But deep sleep is precisely the state in which nothing is seen, nothing is known. Therefore, knowership is not present there.

If deep sleep were utterly beyond our awareness, we might have inferred it through signs, just as we infer fire from smoke. But here, no such inference is necessary. Deep sleep is itself part of our direct and daily experience. Does anyone infer the presence of an elephant in front only from its trumpet? No. The state of deep sleep is not hidden; it is self-evident and self-proven by our own return to waking. This discussion can be deepened further when we examine the three states of experience — waking, dream, and deep sleep. For now, this clarification is sufficient.

The Question of Knowership in the Waking State:

Even though we commonly accept that knowership (*jñātṛtva*) exists in the waking state, it is important to examine whether this is truly the case. To be called a knower (*jñātṛ*), or an enjoyer (*bhoktṛ*), one must necessarily be associated with a body, senses, mind, and other faculties. But what is the actual proof that we possess a body? The answer typically offered is: direct perception (*pratyakṣa*). However, even before any act of perception can occur, we must already be established as knowers (*pramātṛ*), with the body and senses intact. At the very moment we claim to know the body through perception, the body itself becomes the object of knowledge (*prameya*). But then, who or what is the subject? Where is the knower who is to perceive the body, if the body is already being objectified?

Inference and other means of knowledge also ultimately rely on perception. Thus, they cannot supply an independent ground in this case. The unavoidable conclusion is that our belief in the existence of a body precedes all valid proofs. But such belief also appears in the dream state—do we consider dream bodies and experiences to be real? Once, a student asserted, based on geography, that the Earth rotates. But townspeople retorted, "If it rotates, we wouldn’t be able to stand firm!" Another objected, "Are you denying the authority of *Amarakośa*, which describes the Earth as ‘immovable’ (*bhūbhūmiracalā anatā*)?" So too, the argument that our collective belief in the body proves its reality belongs to this category of unexamined reasoning. In truth, body, senses, and mind have no essential relationship to the Self, nor are they present in the deep sleep state. To assert that they are “ours” is simply a form of self-conceit (*abhimāna*).

The Inner Framework of Subjecthood:

We may examine *pramātṛtva* (subjecthood) from another angle. When we say, “There is an object outside,” what is the basis for that claim? We cite the *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge). But it is by the power of the senses that we determine the existence of the external object. What, then, is the basis for the senses themselves? It is the mind (*antaḥkaraṇa*), which alone reports the existence of the senses. Relying on this, we believe we have a body and senses, and engage in worldly dealings (*vyavahāra*).

This mind (*antaḥkaraṇa*) is said to have two functions: the instrumental (*karaṇa-bhūta*) and the agent (*kartṛ-bhūta*). When we say “I know through the mind,” the ‘I’ functioning as the

agent is called *ahaṃkāra* (ego). It is this *ahaṃkāra* that becomes the *upādhi* (limiting adjunct) responsible for the appearance of *pramātṛtva* (subjecthood). The senses convey the knowledge of their objects to the mind, which in turn reports it to this ego, the 'I'.

This 'I'—the apparent subject that receives knowledge through the mind—is what Vedantins refer to as *asmatpratyayagocara* or *ahaṃpratyayagocara*: that which is grasped within the scope of the "I"-notion. This *asmatpratyayagocara pramātṛ* (ego-bound subject) is the one who says, "I saw, I heard, I touched, I knew." In truth, this so-called subject never directly contacts the external world. Just as when one king's army defeats another, a courtier might boast "I conquered the king," so too this ego, operating through mind and senses, falsely claims ownership over perception and knowledge.

Moreover, this ego-subject, being *asmatpratyaya-gocara*, is always relational—it exists only in reference to *yuṣmatpratyaya-gocara* (the "you"-notion). Just as there is no "husband" without a "wife," or no "guru" without a "disciple," so too the "I" has no meaning without the complementary "you," "that," or "it." This mutual interdependence is the essence of duality. But in the deep sleep state (*suṣupti*), there is neither "I" nor "you." All such distinctions dissolve.

Indra's Inquiry and the Evidence of Deep Sleep:

In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, we are told that Indra once approached Prajāpati in search of the knowledge of the Self. Prajāpati taught him that the Self experienced in deep sleep is none other than the fearless, immortal Brahman. Indra, reflecting on this, raised a doubt: "But in that state, neither I nor others know themselves." Thus, the *śruti* itself acknowledges the universal experience of *suṣupti*, where all subject-object distinctions—"I," "you," "they"—are absent. That absence reveals the true nature of the Self, which is untouched by subjecthood. If the Self did not exist in that state, how could we now recall, "I slept well," or "I knew nothing"?

Some, driven by logic, argue that because we remember "I did not know anything," there must have been a subtle form of ego (*ahaṃkāra*), a time-stamp of "then," and even the presence of ignorance itself in deep sleep. But such assumptions contradict direct experience. Even the wisest can be led astray by this sort of logical extrapolation. If such errors occur among the learned, is it any wonder that ordinary people—habitually immersed in the waking state and its conception of knowership—remain equally confused?

In fact, to imagine that knowership existed in deep sleep due to memory is as flawed as believing in the separate existence of the "stone" in "stone doll," or the "head" in "Rāhu's head." There is no real substance behind these phrases, only linguistic constructs. Similarly, in the distinction-less *suṣupti*, we imagine a triad of knower (*jñātṛ*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and known (*jñeya*), which are entirely absent, due to the sway of *māyā*. What is the basis for asserting their absence? Nothing other than one's own experience. Denying this is to deny the very authority of lived experience. Once, in Bombay, a scholar declared, "I accept the triad in all three states—whether Śaṅkarācārya agrees or not!" This may be his opinion, but the question is whether his experience truly aligns with it. For only in the waking state does the self-awareness "I knew this through that" arise. Taking this awareness as our essential nature, we suffer many forms of sorrow. But in reality, even in waking, the "I," the subject, is not always manifest.

Let us consider: when anger, fear, or wonder arises intensely, the awareness of “I” temporarily disappears. This is in everyone’s experience (*anubhava*). Yet even in such states, something remains that knows both the presence and the absence of “I.” What is that? It is what Vedantins call the Witness (*sākṣī*). The “I” associated with ego and body is only the apparent subject. But the pure, unassociated awareness—the Self (*ātman*)—is the true Witness (*cinmātra sākṣī*). It is that which illuminates all states. Understanding this alone leads to the realization of the ultimate truth.

10. The I-notion (*ahaṃpratyayagamya)* and the Witness

(8-8-53)

The Simplicity of Great Discovery: Turning Inward:

In the world, we often witness remarkable discoveries that, once revealed, seem astonishingly simple. People wonder, “Why didn’t I see this before?” and nod in agreement when someone else uncovers the obvious. Consider the example of Newton: when an apple fell from a tree, he alone paused to question why, and through that reflection discovered the force of gravity. Countless others had seen apples fall, yet the insight did not arise. But once Newton articulated the principle, thinkers everywhere exclaimed, “Ah! Of course—it’s so simple!”

The inquiry into the *ātman*, the Self, belongs to this same class of profound yet simple discoveries. It is a turning point in vision, a shift not in content, but in direction. It reveals something that was always present but overlooked. Though no one instructs them to do so, people naturally keep their attention turned outward, absorbed in the observation and evaluation of external objects. Most people, if they reflect at all, concern themselves with the profits and losses of worldly engagement. Such outward-bound thought is common, but turning the gaze inward is rare.

The sages of the Upaniṣads observed this outward tendency of the senses and described it beautifully:

> *parāñci khāni vyatṛṇat svayambhūḥ, tasmāt parāk paśyati nāntarātman*
> — "The self-existent Lord turned the senses outward; therefore, one looks outward, not toward the inner Self." (Kaṭha Upaniṣad 2.1.1)

Upon hearing such a verse, one pauses: “Indeed, this is true! I have never truly turned within. I have not examined my own nature.” Just as someone admiring a grand house from the outside never thinks to look inside, we too may admire the world and its workings without ever glimpsing the ‘sanctum’ within—our own *ātmā*.

Instruction and Realization: The Role of the Guru:

That "I am not of the nature of the knower (*pramātṛ*)" is an unfamiliar idea to most. Though the truth of the Self is ever-established (*nitya-siddha*), it remains concealed until pointed out by someone who knows. Therefore, it is said to be *āgamagamya*—attainable only through the scriptures—or *upadeśagamya*—attainable through the instruction of a teacher. Once properly guided, one wonders how such an evident truth remained unnoticed for so long.

But such instruction is of two kinds. In the case of mantras or ritual practices (*tantras*), scriptural instruction alone does not suffice. The mantra must be received from a qualified guru—one who has attained *mantra-siddhi* (efficacy in the use of the mantra) through rigorous practice such as *puraścaraṇa* (repetition, austerity, and discipline). Only when such a guru imparts the mantra does it take root in the disciple's heart, sprout, and eventually bear fruit. Still, the disciple too must undergo the practice, and only then will the desired *siddhi* (attainment) come.

In contrast, Self-knowledge (*ātmajñāna*) is not of that kind. Though it too is imparted through *upadeśa* (instruction), the teacher's role is not to transmit an external force, but to awaken an inner recognition. The teacher does not give the Self—he removes the gaze from the non-Self. He shifts the disciple’s attention from the external to the internal, from object to subject, from the known to the knower. Thereafter, the *ātmavastu*—the reality of the Self—is self-revealing. It is not created or produced. It shines as one's own self, known not through a mantra or a ritual, but through the immediate cognition, “I am That.”

The Self as Witness and the Illusion of the "I":

We have noted that the Self (*ātman*) is already established—it is self-revealing and requires no external means to be known. Therefore, unlike mantra instruction or ritual practices (*tantra*), the instruction regarding the Self does not demand special *sādhana* or effort on the part of the disciple. Nor is there any secrecy involved, as with mantras. The so-called secret of the Self remains secret only so long as one fails to turn within. Once that inward gaze is directed, the truth is evident to all. Just as one sees the moon hidden among the branches only when another points toward it, so too the *ātman* is seen—if not with the eyes, then with inner discernment—by simply turning attention inward.

To understand the *ātman* as Witness (*sākṣī*), we must begin with a careful inquiry into the nature of the "I" (*ahaṃ*), which is the object of the ego-notion (*ahaṃpratyaya*). This is important, for the apparent "I" bears a striking resemblance to the real Self, even though it is not the Self itself. First, consider that the "I" is never external; it is interior to all objects of knowledge. However much we try, we cannot turn the "I" into a "you" or a "that." All things other than "I"—be they 'you', 'he', or 'it'—can be objectified. But the "I" resists objectification.

There are some, of course, who speak to themselves, treating their own self like another. One well-known police officer named Thammaiah would, each night before bed, replay the praise or blame he had received that day, scolding or commending himself in the very words others had used: “Thammaiah, why did you do that? No sense at all!” or “Good work today, Thammaiah, I’m proud of you!” Such habits reveal how the ego can be split and projected as though it were another. This is akin to the view of the Mīmāṃsakas, who claim that the *ātman*, being grasped by the ego-notion (*ahaṃpratyaya-gocara*), can be both subject and object of knowledge.

But this claim does not hold under scrutiny. To say that the Self knows itself would require us to split it—like a bamboo stalk—into knower and known. This is no longer the indivisible *ātman*, but a fictional division imposed by thought. If the *ātman* is that which is indicated by the *ahaṃpratyaya*, and if it is the Witness (*sākṣī*), then it must lie interior even to that ego-notion. It is not what is known—it is what knows.

The Subtlety of the "I" and the Pervasiveness of Superimposition (Adhyāsa):

Secondly, consider the subtlety of this "I." It is so refined that those absorbed in external pursuits remain unaware of it. Even children take time to develop self-reference; a child named Sītā might say, “Sītā came,” long before saying, “I came.” The awareness of "I" grows gradually, much like how the coconut meat inside separates from its shell as it dries. Even in adulthood, few pause to reflect on what this "I" truly is. Teachers of grammar know how difficult it is to explain abstract pronouns like “I” or “you” to children; similarly, it is difficult even for spiritual students to clearly discern the true nature of “I.”

People habitually say "I" while pointing to the body. They use "I" and "my" as though the body were the subject and its parts or possessions were the self. But the subject and object are categorically distinct. Though people may verbally admit “I am not the body,” in practical life they continue to act as if they are—this is *adhyāsa*, the superimposition of the Self onto the body and vice versa.

A child who developed the habit of urinating on the doorstep was told, “Don’t do it on the threshold!” Eventually, the child repeated the sentence even as it continued the act. In the same way, people say “I am not the body,” yet persist in behaving as though they are. One householder, upon being advised to eat without his shirt on, exclaimed, “That would be like peeling off my skin!” Such was his identification with the shirt. Similarly, many materialistic individuals extend their sense of self to their spouse, children, house, and land. One even told his tenant, “Don’t drive a nail into that wall—it’s like hammering my own chest!” Such *adhyāsa* runs deep.

The Subtlety, Unity, and Dearest Status of the "I":

As mentioned earlier, the empirical self—the “I” (*ahaṃ*)—is not only more subtle and inward than all that is objectifiable, but also closely resembles the *ātman* in several important respects. We have already seen that this “I” cannot itself be made into an object; it remains ever the subject, never appearing before us like “you” or “this.” Yet many continue to believe that the “I” is directly perceived.

Here, a short digression may help illustrate the subtlety of this issue. The renowned scholar Śrī S. Viṭhalaśāstrī—known personally to me—was once sponsored by the Maharaja of Mysore, Śrī Kṛṣṇarāja Woḍeyar, to study Western philosophy at college. Two conversations that took place between Śāstrī and one of the college professors are particularly noteworthy. On one occasion, during a meeting of the philosophical circle, the professor remarked that as physical science progressed, philosophy too must evolve its methods. To this, Śāstrī responded: “Physical science deals with objects; philosophy deals with the subject. How can a method suited for objects be applied to the study of the subject?” The professor is said to have warmly praised this reply.

On another occasion, in a discussion on *adhyāsa* (mutual superimposition), the professor challenged Śāstrī, asking: “Isn’t the ‘I’ nothing more than a composite of body, senses, and other such components?” To which Śāstrī replied, “The body and senses are objects to me—I am the subject that perceives them. How can any relation be established between two things of completely opposite natures?” The professor again commended this answer, remarking: “There is a great difference between you and other Vedantins who merely rain down scriptural quotations.”

Indeed, this “I” is always subtler than, and interior to, all the objects it perceives. It is never itself perceived. And in this respect, too, it mirrors the *ātman*.

Moreover, the uniqueness and indivisibility of the “I” is not merely a philosophical claim—it is reflected even in language. The English grammarian Mason, for example, observes in his grammar that the pronoun “I” has no plural. One might think that “we” is the plural of “I,” but this is not so. “We” implies “I and you,” or “I and he,” not multiple instances of “I.” Why? Because “I” cannot be multiplied—there are no separate, similar “I”s that can be grouped as one groups trees or stones. What this illustrates is that the “I” is always one. Its singularity makes it tempting to identify it directly with the *ātman*.

Another mark of its intimacy with the Self is the natural affection we all feel for it. No one dislikes the “I.” Even though the body and other external objects are, at times, set aside, and one may even sacrifice them when needed, there remains an unshakable love for the “I.” Whether in self-praise, joy upon hearing praise from others, or in anger when criticized—all such reactions bear witness to the dearness of the *ātman*, accessible through the *ahaṃpratyaya* (the I-notion), above all else.

The Discerning Doer, and accepting the Self Beyond the Body:

So far, the empirical self, the "I" perceivable by the notion of "I" (the *ahaṃpratyaya-gocara*) as distinct from the body and other things, has been discussed.

Only those who, on the basis of scripture and reason (*śruti* and *yukti*), discern that there exists a real and continuing self beyond the present body—only they are truly qualified to perform action (*karma*) and engage in meditation (*upāsanā*). For such a one, even though it is certain that this body will perish and return to ashes, there remains a conviction: “There is a distinct essence of mine—my Self—revealed by the ‘I’-notion, which is the true agent of action. That *ātman*, having used the body and its instruments in this life, travels onward and experiences the results of those actions in other realms. It is not this body or the senses that enjoy or suffer, but the one who knows and acts through them.”

Such a one, recognizing this truth from the *śruti* and reasoning aligned with it, will no longer fall into the delusion of identifying with the body. Nor will he act in ways dictated by such delusion. Unlike others, who are bound by attachment and aversion, he lives free from confusion about the nature of the Self, and his conduct reflects that clarity.

The Witness Beyond the Knower: Uncovering the True Self:

Even so, the “I” accessible to the *ahaṃpratyaya*—the “I” that appears as the knower (*pramātṛ*), as the enjoyer (*bhoktṛ*) of various experiences—is not our ultimate nature. That very knower-I, commonly mistaken as the Self, is itself illumined by a deeper reality: the *paramārtha-svarūpa*, the Supreme Self, which shines by its own light, needing no other to reveal it. This profound insight is the contribution of *Vedānta*.

The *ātman* that transcends the empirical “I”—that which lies beyond the scope of the “I”-notion—is termed the *sākṣī*, the Witness. It is by the luminous presence of this Witness that we are able to have the experience of deep sleep (*suṣupti*), and it is this same Witness that enables the post-sleep reflection, “I did not know anything during deep sleep.” Such a recollection would be impossible without an unbroken continuity of awareness—an awareness that remained even in the absence of the knower, the known, and the knowing.

Before this *sākṣī*-awareness can flash forth in clarity, the deeply ingrained misconception that “I am the knower” (*pramātṛ*) must be set aside. To discern this Witness nature of the Self, the aspirant must engage in careful and sustained inquiry.

In our empirical state, the knower knows the known (*jñeya*) through knowledge (*jñāna*), using appropriate instruments (*karaṇa*)—mind, senses, intellect, and so on. The knower, like one who wears glasses, depends upon such intermediaries to apprehend anything. This mediated cognition is the hallmark of our empirical identity.

But in deep sleep, no such mediation occurs. No instruments function, and yet, upon waking, we report the absence of experience with statements such as “I knew nothing.” Who was aware of this absence? It is the *sākṣī* alone—the unconditioned awareness that knows without acting, sees without instruments, abides without effort.

This Witness is not situated in time; it is not located in space; it cannot be measured by either. It is not subject to conditions, changes, or limitations. It is infinite—*ananta*—and its very nature is pure knowledge (*jñāna-svarūpa*). Unlike the empirical knower, it does not depend on knowledge to know; rather, it is that by which all knowledge arises. If this form is understood, it becomes certain that the knower form is not our true nature. This needs to be internalized by further contemplation now.

11. The Witness that is pure awareness, The means of knowledge that is reflected awareness.

(9-8-53)

The Nature of Knowing: The Witness Beyond the Knower:

Though it is commonly held that the knower (*pramātṛ*) apprehends the object (*prameya*) through a means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), the discussion thus far has shown that all three—knower, known, and the means—are illumined by a deeper principle: the Witness (*sākṣī*). When the empirical knower comes to know an object, that act itself is revealed in the light of the *sākṣī*. While the *pramātṛ* undergoes transformation—by thought modifications (*vṛtti*), attention, or mental activity—due to the operation of the *pramāṇa*, the *sākṣī*, being pure awareness, remains ever untouched. It does not transform, even while illuminating all transformations.

The *pramātṛ* projects knowledge onto objects much like someone holding a lantern in the dark projects light onto things unseen. In doing so, he imagines a multiplicity of knowers, objects, and instruments situated in space and time. Thus arises the conventional world of transactions (*vyavahāra*)—the bustling field of subject-object relations. But the *sākṣī* does not participate in this projection; it merely illumines it.

Importantly, the “knowing” attributed to the *sākṣī* is not an action in time. From a grammatical standpoint, "knowing" is a verb—an act that begins and ends, lasting only a moment. But that which begins and ends is not real in the *paramārthika* (absolute) sense. Therefore, *Vedānta* redefines this “knowing” not as an act, but as *svarūpa*—the very nature of the Witness.

Just as the mountain stands, or fire burns—not by performing standing or burning as actions, but because such is their very nature—so too, the *sākṣī* knows, not by effort or function, but by simply being. Knowing and Witnessing are not two attributes of something else; they are one and the same. There is no distinction of property (*dharma*) and possessor (*dharmī*) here. The *sākṣī* is *jñāna-svarūpa*—pure awareness itself

The Appearance of Knower, Known, and Means of Knowledge in the Light of the Witness:

The triad of knower (*pramātṛ*), known (*prameya*), and means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) does not exist independently—it appears and operates only within the illumination of pure consciousness, the *sākṣī*. Just as space exists prior to and independent of the formation of a pot, and as what we call "pot-space" is merely a notional distinction within all-pervading space, so too the emergence of the cognitive triad must be understood as appearing within the ever-present awareness. The pot does not displace or divide space; rather, it appears in it. Similarly, the apparent divisions of subject, object, and cognition arise in the indivisible field of awareness.

Another illustration often given is that of a pot immersed in the waters of a river. The water within the pot is not distinct from the water of the river into which it has been submerged—it is the same, merely appearing limited by the pot's form. Likewise, the knower, the known, and the means of knowledge arise within and are pervaded by the *cidānanda-svarūpa*—pure awareness. This pervasion is referred to as *cidvāpta*—the absorption or saturation of all appearing distinctions within consciousness.

Of course, as with all analogies (*dṛṣṭānta*), this example has its limits. Water, being a tangible substance, exists within space and time. But the *sākṣī*, the witnessing consciousness, does not exist *in* space and time; rather, space and time themselves are projections within that very consciousness. They depend on it for their very appearance. Thus, the purpose of such illustrations is to point to the pervasion of awareness—not to imply that awareness is a physical medium extended in space.

The Borrowed Light of the Means of Knowledge:

To further clarify the function of the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), we may consider another helpful illustration. In some ancient temples, the deity enshrined in the sanctum sanctorum (*garbhagṛha*) cannot be directly seen due to pervasive darkness. In such situations, a mirror is used to reflect sunlight into the sanctum from outside. The *darśana* of the deity then becomes possible—not through the independent light of the mirror, but through the reflected light of the sun.

In this analogy, the mirror represents the *pramāṇa*, and the reflected light is the *cidābhāsa*—the reflected awareness. The *pramāṇa*—whether it is perception, inference, or testimony—has no light of its own. It borrows its illuminating power from the *sākṣī*, the Witness. Just as a mirror cannot produce light in the absence of the sun, no instrument of knowledge can function apart from the borrowed presence of awareness. Thus, what we call the light of the *pramāṇa* is in fact the light of the *sākṣī* alone.

From the very outset, every means of knowledge arises as *cidābhāsa*—a reflected mode of consciousness—born and sustained within the illumination of the Witness. In this regard, the *ācārya* affirms:

"*ātmanaḥ svarūpaṃ jñaptiḥ, na tato vyatiricyate |... te ātmavijñānasyābhāsāḥ... ātmana eva dharmā vikriyārūpā iti avivekibhiḥ parikalpāḥ*"
(Taittirīya Bhāṣya 2.1)

“Awareness (*jñapti*) is the very nature of the *ātman*; it is not something separate from it. And yet, when the intellect (*buddhi*), characterized by its limitations (*upādhi*), becomes modified through contact with the senses and assumes the form of objects (*viṣayākāra*), the resulting cognition appears as distinct knowledge. But these are merely appearances—reflections of self-knowledge—and are in truth illumined by the Self alone. They are mistakenly imagined by the undiscerning as real modifications and attributes of the Self.”

In essence, even the operations of the mind and intellect that result in cognition are not autonomous events. They are illumined, upheld, and made intelligible by the *sākṣī*, yet wrongly attributed to the *ātman* by those who lack discrimination (*viveka*).

Even so, when the intellect (*buddhi*), which serves as the limiting adjunct (*upādhi*) of the Self (ātman), undergoes transformation into the form of objects through the sense organs such as the eyes, there arise lights or illumination that reveal sound and other sensory objects. These lights themselves become the content or object (*viṣaya*) for the Self’s knowing nature called *ātma-vijñāna* (which is knowledge that belongs to the intellect but is pervaded and made possible by the Self). At the very moment they arise, they do so pervaded by the consciousness of the Self. Therefore, they remain as mere appearances (ābhāsa) of ātma-vijñāna. These appearances correspond to the verbal meaning (*dhātvartha*) of the word “vijñāna” (knowledge). The ignorant, however, imagine that these modifications are actual attributes of the Self—this is the meaning of the Bhāṣya statement.

Since the knower (*pramātṛ*), the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and the known object (*prameya*) arise in the witness-consciousness (*sākṣī*) and appear as reflections of consciousness (*chid-ābhāsa*), one should not mistakenly assume that they possess a separate existence apart from the Witness. In the previously mentioned analogy of water, instead of considering that there is a brass pot in the water and that water is filled within that pot, it would be more appropriate to think of an ice vessel floating on water, with water present inside it. In such a case, everything would still be the river’s water alone. Similarly, the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) appears in the witness-consciousness (*sākṣī*) as a reflection of consciousness (*chid-ābhāsa*), and if one conceptualizes the relation between the example (*upamāna*) and the thing exemplified (*upameya*) in this way, it would be even more reasonable.

It should not be said that the knower (*pramātṛ*), the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and the known (*prameya)* are separate and exist as reflections of consciousness (chid-ābhāsa). Just as the milk mixed with flour given to Aśvatthāmā in his childhood is not real milk in truth, similarly, the knowledge arising in the Witness as the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa-jñāna*) is not another real knowledge but merely an appearance of knowledge (*jñānābhāsa*).

In the domain where the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and the like are considered separate entities, we still conduct transactions based on the notion that they bear the reflection of the witness-consciousness (*sākṣī-caitanya*). However, upon deeper analysis, they have no independent existence apart from the Witness. The Vedāntins have

formulated this concept only for the sake of facilitating intellectual comprehension, enabling the mind to grasp the notion that the knower (*pramātṛ*) and the like are distinct.

If examined more closely, the idea that the witness (*sākṣī*) illumines the knower (*pramātṛ*) and other entities is logically established (*tarka-siddha*) but is not the absolute reality (paramārtha). Stating otherwise would amount to a contradiction (*vyāhatokti*).

If one were to say, “My mother is barren” or “I have been a *mauni* (silent sage) since birth,” such statements would be inherently contradictory. In the same way, the assertion that the *sākṣī* (witness) illuminates the *sākṣya* (the witnessed) is self-contradictory. In this context, our intellect (*buddhi*), without our awareness, generates a sudden premonition. First, it conceptualizes the *sākṣī*, and in the very next moment, it assumes its own identity within the *sākṣī*. As a result, it imagines that the *sākṣī* and the *sākṣya* exist simultaneously.

This is akin to a dog turning around in circles, trying to catch its own short tail—how quickly can one turn to see the *sākṣī*? The *sākṣī* is ever the seer, never the seen. When one stands in the standpoint of the *sākṣī*, the *sākṣya* does not appear at all, for the *sākṣī* alone is the ultimate reality.

Just as a single saree worn by different female characters in a play appears to take on different colors depending on the lighting, the intellect (*buddhi*) swiftly imagines that the same sākṣī assumes three distinct forms: *pramātṛ* (knower), *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge), and *prameya* (object of knowledge). It further superimposes a hierarchy, thinking that the pramātṛ is the substratum of the pramāṇa, and that the prameya is its subject. However, when one remains established in the sākṣī, the entire projection of *pramātṛ, pramāṇa, and prameya* ceases to exist. Conversely, when the perception of these divisions arises, the sākṣī—as the pure, undivided reality—is no longer seen at all.

"ēkō dēvaḥ sarvabhūtēṣu gūḍhaḥ sarvavyāpī sarvabhūtāntarātmā | karmādhyakṣaḥ sarvabhūtādhivāsaḥ sākṣī cētā kēvalō nirguṇaśca" (Śvē. 6-11)

The *śruti* declares that the one ātman, which is the Self of all beings, remains ever the same, and that this very *sākṣī* (witness) is nirdharmaka—devoid of all attributes. Just as a rope may be mistakenly perceived as a snake, a crack in the ground, or a stream of water—where none of these imagined forms exist apart from the rope—so too, the *pramātṛ, pramāṇa, and prameya* do not have an existence independent of the sākṣī. This truth must be realized by unwaveringly abiding in the standpoint of the sākṣī and contemplating it with steadfast attention.

Even so, the Vedāntins, while acknowledging that the pramātṛ, pramāṇa, and prameya have no absolute reality, still retain them provisionally for the purpose of teaching the scriptures to aspirants of truth. However, one should not mistake this for an assertion of their true existence; the intent is not to establish their independent reality but to guide the seeker toward the realization of the sākṣī as the sole truth.

Consider this illustrative story: A wealthy old man owned seventeen elephants. As he lay on his deathbed, he called his sons and declared, “Let my eldest son take half of my elephants, the second son a third, and the youngest one-ninth.” With these final words, he passed away. The sons were baffled—how could they divide seventeen elephants into halves, thirds, or ninths without breaking them apart? Unable to resolve the dilemma, they sought the counsel of the wise minister of the city. The minister, after careful thought,

proposed a solution: “I will add one of my own elephants to the count. Now, divide them accordingly.” With eighteen elephants in total, the eldest son took half—nine elephants; the second took a third—six elephants; and the youngest took one-ninth—two elephants. The total now accounted for all seventeen elephants. The minister then pointed out that the additional elephant was no longer needed and simply took it back to his stable.

In the same way, the provisional superimposition of *sākṣī* alongside *sākṣya* is employed solely as a means to facilitate understanding. Just as the extra elephant served only to resolve the division without having any real necessity of its own, the dualistic conception of *sākṣī* and *sākṣya* is merely a teaching device—meant to lead the seeker to the ultimate realization that only the *sākṣī* truly exists.

Vedāntins do not ultimately affirm the independent existence of *sākṣī* in an absolute sense. Rather, sākṣī itself is an imagined standpoint within *sākṣī,* and their true position is that sākṣī is none other than non-dual c*aitanya* (pure consciousness). This approach to instruction is known as ***adhyāropa-apavāda-nyāya***—the method of superimposition and subsequent negation. It is so named because, during the phase of inquiry, certain concepts are provisionally accepted from the standpoint of empirical transactions (*vyavahāra*), which is itself an appearance projected by ignorance (*avidyā-kalpita*). However, once the ultimate reality (*paramārtha*) is discerned, this method systematically negates the earlier assumptions, revealing that what was superimposed (*adhyāropita*) was never truly present to begin with.

Once, a young man traveled from a distant land to Tiruvannamalai in search of Sri Ramana Maharshi, seeking the ultimate truth. Despite undertaking numerous *sādhanās* and consulting many *sādhus*, he remained without peace of mind. It was this fundamental inquiry—the means to true knowledge—that had brought him from afar to the Maharshi.

When he posed his question, the Maharshi remained silent. The young man, insistent, repeated his inquiry: “I have come from very far away; please, kindly tell me the best way to liberation.”

“Okay, then go back the way you came!” the Maharshi replied.

The young man was taken aback. “Did I endure so much expense and hardship just to receive this answer?” he thought. Yet, the Maharshi’s words carried a deeper meaning: through superimposition (*adhyāropa*), the young man had strayed far from the Self. By negation (*apavāda*)—retracting the steps of error—he would return to the very Self he sought.

Alas, at that moment, the young man could not grasp the import of these words. But as the truth settled within him through reflection and inquiry, he must have eventually been filled with profound joy.

Vedāntins employ terms like *pramātṛ*, *pramāṇa*, and others as pedagogical tools to guide seekers toward the truth. However, the ignorant, mistaking these imagined distinctions as real, become confused, questioning, “These people acknowledge such differences and yet declare that the truth is non-dual! How can this be?”

This confusion arises only when one forgets that such concepts are mere instruments for revealing the ultimate truth. If one understands that they are meant to be discarded through negation (apavāda), all delusion is avoided. Holding firmly to the teaching—

"*Nāhaṃ deho nendriyāṇyantaraṅgaṃ Nāhaṃkāraḥ prāṇavargo na buddhiḥ |*
Dārāpatyakṣetravittādidūraḥ Sākṣī nityaḥ pratyagātmā śivo'ham ||"

—"I am not the body, nor the senses, nor the inner faculties; I am not the ego, the vital forces, or the intellect. Far removed from wife, children, land, and wealth, I am the eternal witness, the inner Self, ever-auspicious," one should persistently reject all superimpositions and recognize the all-pervading *sākṣī* alone as reality.

Ātmānātma-viveka (the discernment between the Self and the non-Self) does not mean retaining a separate non-Self alongside the Self, but rather dissolving all appearances into the Self through true knowledge, realizing that nothing exists apart from it.

Up to this point, the entire methodology of Śaṅkara Vedānta has been outlined and briefly explained. However, for some, this exposition might feel like "stuffing a sweet dumpling, *kadubu*, down the throat when it is hard to drink water," as author Rāmaśvamēdhakāra wryly remarked. Therefore, it becomes necessary to elucidate the same subject from multiple angles, addressing doubts and clarifying key points. In our times, numerous forms of Vedantic engagement have emerged—some of which deviate significantly from the rigorous inquiry prescribed by Śaṅkara. There exists what may be called *bhangi* Vedānta—where Vedānta is enjoyed in a haze of cannabis, making serious deliberation unappealing. Then there is bench (*katte)* Vedānta where discussions take place casually on public platforms or street corners, only to be forgotten soon after. Likewise, those who believe that simply singing the *tattvas* (philosophical truths) dispels all doubts see no need for critical inquiry. Still others take refuge in *vyākhyāna* Vedānta, where one revels in elaborate expositions, endlessly quoting from *Bhāmatī*, *Kalpataru*, and *Parimaḷa*—immersing themselves in commentaries and sub-commentaries without directly engaging with the essence of the teaching.

What I am discussing here is *Śuddha Śaṅkara Vedānta*, where the direct testimony of the Upaniṣadic statement serves as the main authority, and universal experience serves as the final deciding factor. I request that you approach this series of lectures from this perspective.

12. What is Experience (anubhava)?

(10-8-53)

Thus far, I have occasionally used the terms *anubhava* (intuitive experience, or simply experience when there is no confusion) and *tarka* (logic). Today, let us consider what *anubhava* signifies according to Śaṅkarācārya.

In the Muslim tradition, it is believed that the Prophet Muhammad received the verses of the Quran from *Parameśvara* while in a state of *samādhi*. Similarly, in the Christian tradition, it is held that great men, inspired by *Parameśvara*, composed the Bible. This belief exists, and we cannot dismiss Muhammad's *samādhi* or the inspiration of the Bible's authors as being devoid of experience. Muhammad's exquisite Arabic poetry in the Quran is unparalleled, and the Bible writers' depictions of heaven have captivated many minds. Such occurrences, then, may be considered remarkable events born of certain

extraordinary experiences. However, these are not *universal experiences*, for Muhammad's realization was his alone, and the divine inspiration of the Bible's authors was unique to them.

There are also individuals who claim to have realized their chosen deity, some even asserting that they have traveled to and returned from the abode of that deity. Patañjali's *sūtras* and other texts affirm that through the repetition of certain *mantras*, one may attain the vision of the corresponding *mantra* deity. While we cannot categorically deny such experiences—since only those who have performed these *sādhanas* are qualified to validate them—it is certain that these, too, are not *universal experiences*. They are extraordinary occurrences limited to a few.

During the reign of Shivappa Nayaka, a *jangama* claimed to have seen Kailāsa, while a Vaiṣṇava brāhmaṇa insisted he had seen Vaikuṇṭha, leading to a heated dispute over the supremacy of Śiva and Viṣṇu. The king, unable to settle the matter, asked, "This humble self has seen neither Kailāsa nor Vaikuṇṭha—how, then, can I resolve your quarrel?" This story, though possibly crafted for amusement, conveys a crucial principle: no universally valid doctrine can be established based on individual mystical experiences, whether they involve visions of other worlds or the realization of a chosen deity.

In the past, there were two sages, Kapila and Kaṇāda. The Sāṃkhyas, followers of Kapila, asserted that he was perfect from birth, while the Vaiśeṣikas, followers of Kaṇāda, proclaimed that Kaṇāda possessed the ability to perceive even the subtlest, imperceptible realities. The Buddhists, in turn, declared that Buddha was omniscient and that his teachings were so profound that even the walls themselves echoed them, enlightening all who heard. However, no theory can be deemed *universally valid* merely because certain individuals are claimed to be omniscient.

Kumārila Bhaṭṭa challenged such assertions, asking, "If Kapila is omniscient, what proof is there that Kaṇāda is not? And if both are omniscient, how is it that they hold differing views?" Mocking the Buddhist claim that the very walls echoed the Buddha's teachings, he quipped, "If walls are speaking, perhaps evil spirits have taken up residence in them—why should we accept such utterances as valid?" Even today, some claim that certain great individuals are perfect beings, and their followers zealously propagate their teachings, narrating extraordinary visions revealed by these *siddhas*. However, one cannot establish the universal validity of these teachings solely based on the miraculous powers (*siddhis*) of such figures, for *siddhis* are not *universal experiences*.

Indeed, there are great ascetics and powerful yogis, and their disciples often declare them to be extraordinary beings. There is no need to deny the immense fruits of *tapas* or the remarkable attainments of *yoga*. However, the experiences arising from *tapas* or *yoga* remain personal and subjective—they cannot be called *universal experiences*.

Many attempt to establish their doctrines and refute their opponents through *mantras*, *tantras*, magical displays, or visions received in dreams. While these may hold some significance, none of them constitute what can be truly called *universal experience*. No ultimate, universally accepted truth can be firmly established through their power.

Thus, there may be many *gurus* who manifest divine grace, *yoga*, *tapas*, *mantras*, *tantras*, and other spiritual practices. They are indeed *gurus* within the realm of their respective fields of experience. It is certain that specific attainments arise through their guidance.

However, none of these can serve as the foundation for a *universal experience*. Failing to recognize this distinction, many entangle the philosophy of Vedānta within *yoga*, believing that the realization of Vedānta is impossible without *yogic* practices.

If those who claim omniscience through *yoga* or *tapas* continue to assert their authority—despite holding contradictory views—how are ordinary people, who possess only limited knowledge, to determine who is truly omniscient? This question arises repeatedly. If one group asserts, "Our *yogis* have realized this truth," another may counter, "Ask our *yogis*—they will say otherwise!" In such a case, what refuge remains for both disputants other than a *universal experience*? The mere fact that someone performs miracles through *tapas* or the power of *mantras* does not establish their opinion as universally valid, for even the ascetics (*tapasvīs*) and *mantra* practitioners on the opposing side may be capable of similar feats. Likewise, the argument that "this accords with our *guru-śiṣya sampradāya* (lineage of teacher and disciple), and that does not" cannot serve as proof of a universally accepted conclusion simply by clinging to tradition.

What Kind of Experience Does Śaṅkarācārya Speak Of?

Is Vedānta itself not something transmitted by a *guru*? If followers of Śaṅkara Vedānta claim that the interpretation their *gurus* provide for the *śāstra* is the correct one, does that not also become a *subjective* experience? Do they not also say that understanding comes through serving a true *guru* (*sadguru*)? While Śaṅkara Vedānta asserts that ‘knowing That one thing is like knowing everything’, how can this be *universally* accepted? What is the *universal experience* that supports it? How can it be established that all desires are instantaneously fulfilled for a *brahmajñānī*, as stated in the *śruti*? Is it not universally observed that desires must be experienced one by one? As Vyāsa states, "A person experiences desires as one plucks flowers one by one; likewise, death seizes one attached to pleasures, just as a wolf carries away a lamb"—this is evident to all through direct experience. Many such doubts arise in this manner.

The solution to all these questions is simple. It is true that the truth (*tattva*) taught in Śaṅkara Vedānta must be understood through the *śāstra* and the guidance of the *ācāryas* (teachers). However, Sureśvarācārya, the direct disciple of Śaṅkarācārya, clarifies:

"So’yaṃ nyāyyo’pi vedāsvārthaḥ śāstrācāryaprasādalabho’pyanapekṣita śāstrācāryaprasādaḥ labhyaḥ"—

Even though it is attained through the grace of the *śāstra* and the *ācāryas*, its existence does not depend on them. Gaining *śāstra-dṛṣṭi* (scriptural insight) through the *ācārya’s* guidance does not mean attaining some *new* yogic accomplishment (*yoga-siddhi*). It is merely learning how to use the vision that is already available to all. The realization of Brahman (*brahma-prāpti*) described in Vedānta is not like reaching a previously unknown destination. Brahman is eternally established as the *ātman* in everyone.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, in his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, cites a passage from the *Brahma Sūkta* of the *Atharvaveda*:

"Brahma dāśā, Brahma dāsā, Brahmaivēme kitavāḥ"—

The fishermen who engage in the lowly task of catching fish are also Brahman; the slaves, bound from birth, are also Brahman; the gamblers, whose nature is deceit, are also

Brahman. Thus, even the most degraded beings are said to be of the nature of Brahman. Not only the exalted deities like Brahmā and the great ascetics like Vāmadeva and other *ṛṣis*, not only the devoted performers of *karma* and renunciants, but also fishermen, slaves, gamblers—those regarded as lowly—are none other than Brahman. Animals, birds, beasts, insects, worms, plants, trees, and creepers—all are Brahman.

The one Brahman that pervades all of these is the same Brahman that shines as the *sākṣī*, which is my very nature, self-established and ever-present. This is the experience of the knower of Vedānta. What *śāstra* or *guru* needs to bestow something that is already self-evident?

Viewed rightly, irrespective of status—whether one is great or humble, a child or an adult, a man or a woman, a Brāhmaṇa or a non-Brāhmaṇa, even a *mleccha*—to every living being, Brahman remains as the *ātman*. It is known directly, without the need for any *external* attainment (*āgantuka-siddhi*). This is the Vedantic conclusion.

It is true that Vedāntins say, "The meaning our *gurus* have given to the *śāstra* is correct." But when seen from this perspective, this *śāstra* is also *your śāstra*, and these *gurus* are also *your gurus*. This is because their teaching does not introduce something new; rather, it simply reminds you of the Brahman that is eternally present within you as *sākṣī caitanya svarūpa* (the very nature of witness-consciousness). This is the essence of Śaṅkara Vedānta.

Here, individual mystical experience holds no special significance. Indeed, Vedāntins praise service to a true *guru*, but this praise is found within the *Upaniṣads* themselves and aligns with universal experience. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* declares:

*"Yaṃ yaṃ lokaṃ manasā saṃvibhāti viśuddhasatyaḥ kāmayate yāṃśca kāmān | taṃ taṃ lokaṃ jayatē tāṃśca kāmāṃstasyādātmajñaṃ hyarcayat"**

"Only one whose mind is pure attains the fulfillment of all desires."

Thus, if a *brahmajñānī* desires worldly enjoyments—be it family, friends, food, music, or wealth—those enjoyments become available. Therefore, one who seeks true well-being must serve a knower of the Self. Furthermore,

"upāsate puruṣaṃ ye hyakāmāste śukrametadativartanti dhīrāḥ" (Mu. 3-2-1)

"Those who, free from desire, worship the knower of the Self as they would worship the Supreme (Paramātma) to attain liberation, they get established in the Supreme and will escape the cycle of rebirth."

This is appropriate because, for a *brahmajñānī*, Brahman—the very fulfillment of all desires—is none other than the Self. Thus, they have no external desires left to be attained. Whatever happiness one enjoys in the world is ultimately for the Self alone. From this perspective, it is said that the *wise* experience all enjoyments at once.

A disciple who has gained *śāstra-dṛṣṭi* (scriptural insight) through the teachings of a *brahmajñānī* is considered equal to the *guru* because, having realized Brahman—the fulfillment of all desires—they, too, experience everything at once. This is the true purport of the *Upaniṣads*.

Brahman alone is the absolute reality. Since the entire world is but a superimposition upon it, knowing that *one* Brahman is akin to knowing *everything*. This is a universally valid teaching (*sāmānyānubhava*). The *gurus* merely reveal the Brahman that is eternally present as the Self. Just as one would be grateful to someone who reminds them that the necklace they searched for was already around their neck, so too is a disciple naturally grateful to the *guru*, whose instruction dispels ignorance and makes available the ever-present Self.

This opinion could have been stated at the beginning of the lecture itself. But, it wouldn't be readily grasped by those who are influenced by the 'pramātṛbuddhi' (the notion of the self as the knower). The statement that a knower of the Self has no desires unattained, since the Self alone is the ultimate reality, will be truly understood only by one who has realized the nature of the Self through the process of contemplation and has become established in it. Therefore, it has been explained that the function of *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge) and the state of being a *pramātṛ* (knower) are superimpositions, and that the *kūṭastha caitanya* (immutable consciousness) which is the witness of everything, is the ultimate reality, is established. Now, the truth that a knower of Brahman attains all desires at once becomes comprehensible.

Even though this matter is universally experienced, those whose vision is turned outward, being driven by desires, will not be convinced that this principle is true. Therefore, after distinguishing between the seer and the seen, using the method described earlier, one should repeatedly contemplate on the fact that the entire world, beginning with the *pramātṛ*, is the object of the witness, which is the Self. Just as one would use a magnifying glass if the written letters are not clearly visible, this practice is helpful in realizing the existing reality itself.

13. Ātmasākṣātkāra (Self-Realization)

(11-8-53)

In the *Upaniṣads*, there is a method of presenting the *tattva* (truth) by first summarizing it briefly and then expanding upon it. This is known as the *samāsa-vyāsa paddati* (concentric method). For those learning directly from a *guru*, a concise statement followed by a more detailed explanation makes comprehension easier and aids in retaining the subject matter.

In the present age, however, due to a decline in grasping ability and the need for knowledge to be disseminated through books, there has been an increase in the length of texts, though often with little substantive content. But leaving that aside for now, let us consider an example of the *samāsa-vyāsa* method found in the *Upaniṣads*.

In the *Brahmānanda Vallī* of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, we first encounter the aphoristic declaration: *"He who knows Brahman attains the ultimate (supreme goal)."* This immediately raises several questions: What is Brahman? How is it to be realized? How does one attain the supreme *puruṣārtha*? In response, the text expands: *"He who knows that Brahman, which is truth, knowledge, and infinite, and which is in the cave of the heart, attains all desires at once."*

Following this, the *Upaniṣad* further elaborates: How is Brahman truth? How is it realized in the heart? How does the fulfillment of all desires happen at once? This method of

structured exposition, where a brief statement is expanded upon in a systematic manner, is a hallmark of the *Upaniṣads* and aids in both understanding and recollection.

Following this same approach, I now seek to expand upon the ideas discussed so far. In previous discussions, it was established that *pramāṇa* (the means of knowledge) does not introduce any new attribute into the *prameya* (the object of knowledge); rather, it only removes misconceptions. The entire realm of *tripuṭī*—the triad of *pramātṛ* (knower), *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge), and *prameya* (object of knowledge)—is illumined solely by the light of *sākṣicaitanya* (witness-consciousness). Since this consciousness is all-pervading, everything exists only by virtue of its presence and is illumined by its light. The *pramāṇa* requires the light of the witness to function. It itself shines only by borrowing that light and, in turn, reveals the object of knowledge through its reflection. One cannot ask, "From where does the witness receive its illumination?"—for the witness is itself of the nature of pure consciousness and light, self-evident and self-established. By the light of the witness, the knower (*pramātṛ*) is revealed as *cit-svarūpa* (pure consciousness). For the knower, *pramāṇa* is merely an instrument.

The knower, also called *ātman*, is that which is immediately grasped in the "I" experience (*ahaṃ-pratyaya*). The knower employs *pramāṇa* to grasp the *prameya*. However, the light within *pramāṇa* is only a reflection of the *antaḥkaraṇa* (inner faculty), which serves as the *upādhi* (limiting adjunct) for both the knower and *pramāṇa*. The question then arises: If the knower can know an object through a means of knowledge, can the knower not also know itself?

The Difference Between *Antaḥkaraṇa* in Vedānta and Western Psychology:

The term *antaḥkaraṇa* is often translated into English as "mind." However, Western psychology does not seem to accept the mind as a *substance*; rather, it considers only mental functions, speaking of "minds" rather than a singular *antaḥkaraṇa*. Religious and philosophical traditions also present various divisions of the mind, leading physical scientists to dismiss metaphysical thought (*ātibhautika-vicāra*) as an incomprehensible pursuit. This is humorously illustrated by the anecdote of two people speaking to each other in languages neither understands, both nodding their heads in mutual confusion.

Yet even within Western psychology, there are numerous schools of thought, and no single doctrine prevails. Furthermore, Western psychology primarily concerns itself with the *external* mind—the mind as observed in others. The examination of the mind in this approach involves studying its effects on the body, external behaviors, and reactions. For them, wakefulness, dreaming, and sleep are understood as *another person's* wakefulness, dreaming, and sleep.

This is not to say that psychology has not produced practical benefits. Through psychoanalysis, doctors have successfully treated various disorders. Subfields such as mesmerism and hypnotism have emerged from this discipline. However, there remains a fundamental distinction between the discussion of *antaḥkaraṇa* in Vedānta and its treatment in psychology.

Antaḥkaraṇa in Vedānta:

In Vedānta, *antaḥkaraṇa* refers to one's *own* inner faculty—the mind as it is experienced directly by the seeker. Similarly, wakefulness, dream, and sleep refer to *one's own*

wakefulness, dream, and sleep. This perspective is unanimously upheld by Śrī Śaṅkarabhagavatpāda. The Vedāntic method is therefore rooted in self-inquiry (*ātma-vicāra*), where the study of the mind is not an external examination of another's mental states but a direct investigation into one's own consciousness.

This distinction is critical, for without understanding it, one may conflate external psychological analysis with the introspective methodology of Vedānta. The former examines consciousness as an *object*, whereas the latter reveals consciousness as the *subject*, the ever-present witness (*sākṣī*) that is self-luminous and independent of all mental fluctuations.

This perspective can be described as spiritual or seeker-oriented. When viewed in this light, the term *antaḥkaraṇa*—meaning "inner instrument"—clearly explains why it is so named. Since it resides within and serves as the intermediary for perceiving the world through the senses, it is called *antaḥkaraṇa*. However, if viewed from the perspective of the subject (seeing an object), it might more appropriately be called *bahiḥkaraṇa*, for it directs awareness outward to external objects.

Furthermore, *antaḥkaraṇa* possesses the ability to experience internal states such as happiness and sorrow. When it performs this function, its designation as *antaḥkaraṇa* becomes even more meaningful. However, if *antaḥkaraṇa* is to be truly deserving of its name, it must engage in a higher, more inward-directed activity. The one who does not employ the *antaḥkaraṇa* merely to explore external objects through the senses or to react to the happiness and sorrow arising within due to external causes, but instead directs it toward contemplation of his own essential nature (*svarūpa*), has made his *antaḥkaraṇa* truly an *antaḥkaraṇa*. Such a person has begun to qualify for Vedānta.

For *antaḥkaraṇa* to be fully worthy of its name, it must be dedicated to the discovery of the *ātman*, which resides in the deepest core of one's being. A young man once approached Ramana Maharshi, who was ever established in Brahman, and asked, "I have traveled a long way to see you; please tell me the path to attain the *ātman*." Maharshi replied, "Then go back the way you came!" The deeper meaning of this statement must be understood. In leaving the *ātman*, we have wandered far outward; thus, we must retrace our steps—we must turn our *antaḥkaraṇa* inward. The outward flow of the *antaḥkaraṇa* through the senses is driven by *kāma* (desire); but to seek the *ātman* within, one must reverse this flow.

Turning the *antaḥkaraṇa* inward with the desire for Self-realization is not easy. It is as difficult as reversing the flow of the Ganges back to its source. Yet, while the mind flowing outward leads to mortality, when turned inward, it leads to immortality. For this reason, the *śruti* declares:

"Ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ"
("The *ātman* is to be seen, heard, reflected upon, and meditated upon.")

This was the instruction given by Yājñavalkya to his wife Maitreyī. It means: One must seek the Self, one must listen to teachings about it, one must reflect upon it, and one must meditate on it.

This is not an injunction (*vidhi*), for *ātma-śravaṇa* (listening to teachings on the Self) and related practices do not lead to the attainment of an unseen or future result. The

injunctions of *karma* exist to produce unseen results (*adṛṣṭa-phala*) such as heaven. In contrast, the teaching of *jñāna* (knowledge) is intended to reveal immortality, which is already present here and now. Thus, while this statement is not a *vidhi* in the strict sense, it functions like a *vidhi* in that it has the power to reverse the mind's outward tendency and turn it inward.

I recall an incident from a visit to Hubli. At the Ārūḍha Maṭha, a pond was being constructed. After viewing Siddhārūḍha's shrine from the outside, a friend and I entered the monastery. Inside, we saw what seemed to be Siddhārūḍha himself, sitting in meditation behind a glass panel. We watched in amazement, only to realize after some time that it was merely a statue.

Similarly, some people misinterpret the phrases *draṣṭavyaḥ, śrotavyaḥ, mantavyaḥ, nididhyāsitavyaḥ* ("That which should be seen, heard, thought about, and meditated upon") as injunctions, merely because they end with the suffix *-tavya* (which often expresses obligation or necessity). Though these are not truly *vidhis*, they serve a *vidhi-like* function in that they compel the seeker to turn away from external engagement and focus on the Self.

"Yo hi bahirmukhaḥ pravartate puruṣaḥ iṣṭaṁ me bhūyāt aniṣṭaṁ mā bhūt iti na ca tatra ātyantikaṁ puruṣārthaṁ labhate…"

("The one who is outward-facing seeks, 'May my desires be fulfilled, may my unpleasant experiences be avoided,' but in doing so, he never attains the highest *puruṣārtha* (ultimate goal).")

To such a person, the scriptures declare: If you seek the ultimate *puruṣārtha*, you must turn inward and seek the *ātman* alone.

How Can the Antaḥkaraṇa Know the Ātman?

Turning the *antaḥkaraṇa* inward is difficult, but not impossible. However, even after it is turned inward, how can it know the *ātman*? The *ātman* is the witness of the *antaḥkaraṇa*. The *antaḥkaraṇa* is able to illumine external objects only because it is suffused with the light of that witness, which has already been established through reasoning. Given this, how can the *antaḥkaraṇa* ever grasp the *ātman*?

This doubt naturally arises. Yet, the certainty of *ātmajñāna* (Self-knowledge) is beyond question, for many have attained it, many have shared their realization, and many have followed their teachings to liberation. However, the question remains: How can the *antaḥkaraṇa*, which is itself an object, know the *ātman*, which is the ultimate subject? I raise this doubt here in order to arrive at its resolution. For those seeking to understand the answer, I cite a verse (*kārikā*) by Śrī Gauḍapādācārya:

"Ātma-satyānubodhena na saṅkalpayate yadā |
Amanassāṁ tadā yāti grāhyābhāve tadagraham ||" (Māṇḍūkya Kārikā 3.32)

("When there is firm understanding (*anubodha*) that the *ātman* alone is the truth, no *saṅkalpa* (mental projection) arises. Then, the mind becomes *amanas* (without mind). Since there remains nothing to be grasped, there is no grasping.")

To grasp the meaning of this *kārikā*, we must recall that the *antaḥkaraṇa* is known by various names—*manas* (mind), *buddhi* (intellect), *citta* (memory/consciousness), and *ahaṃkāra* (ego). It is called *manas* when engaged in deliberation (*manana-vṛtti*); it is called *buddhi* when engaged in ascertainment (*niścaya-vṛtti*); it is called *citta* when it retains awareness of objects; and it is called *ahaṃkāra* when it identifies as "I." These different names arise due to the different functions of the *antaḥkaraṇa*.

The *antaḥkaraṇa* resolves objects, and when there are no objects left to resolve, it ceases to function as a mind. In deep sleep, where nothing is perceived, the mind is no longer active as *manas*, though it exists in an unmanifest state. However, that state is not our present concern. Rather, when the seeker realizes—through the scriptures and the *ācārya's* teachings—that the *ātman* alone is the truth and that there exists no object apart from it, then no duality remains for the mind to grasp, and thus its grasping ceases.

As we have seen, *pramāṭṛ* (knower), *prameya* (known), and *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge) are all ultimately the *sākṣī* (witness), or the *advitīya-caitanya* (non-dual consciousness). When this is firmly established, there is no longer any duality, and at that point, the mind ceases to remain as the mind—it becomes identical with the *ātman*.

In worldly affairs, the mind appears separate from the Self, much like a stick submerged in water appears bent. When removed from the water, the stick is seen as straight once more. Similarly, when the mind is withdrawn from external engagements and recognized as none other than the *ātman*, it is realized as *amanas*—the state beyond mind.

However, many misunderstand the concept of *amanastā* (the state of no-mind). There are those who propagate a *sādhana* (spiritual practice) known as *amanaska-yoga*, asserting, "The mind must become mindless; only then will it realize the *ātman*!" Whether due to an inability to cultivate the subtle intellect required to grasp the self-evident truth, or out of a fascination for esoteric *sādhanas* that promise hidden benefits, such people abandon the direct path and instead pursue *unmanī-avasthā* (a trance-like state), *samādhi*, and similar techniques.

In their search for new paths, they look for the *ātman* where it is not. It is true that the *śāstra* instructs one to seek the *ātman*, but we must remember that such teachings are directed at those whose minds are turned outward, urging them to turn their *antaḥkaraṇa* (inner faculty) inward. The *Gītā* declares, *"ātma-saṃsthaṃ manaḥ kṛtvā"*—"placing the mind in the *ātman* and thinking of nothing else." Misunderstanding this, some argue, "The mind itself illumines the *ātman*—so how can one place the mind in the *ātman* without first knowing what the *ātman* is?"

The response to this is simple: placing the mind in the *ātman* is akin to superimposing the imagined snake upon the rope—only to later recognize that there was no snake at all, only the rope. By contemplating the *ātman*, one must transform the mind into the *ātman* itself. This is the true meaning of the statement.

A Western woman once wrote in an English magazine, "We have all lost our *ātman*; we must find it again." Inspired by this article, many began wondering, "How do we find the *ātman*?"—poor souls! What they fail to realize is that the one searching for the *ātman* is the *ātman* itself.

Once, the philosopher Kant returned home from an evening walk. His servant, not recognizing him in the dim light, absentmindedly repeated to him the same phrase he had been telling others: "Sir, the master is not at home!" Likewise, we do not dwell in our own selves—the mind does not abide in the *ātman*. The mind must dissolve into the *ātman* and become mindless; only then is the truth of the *ātman* realized.

The Meaninglessness of the Term Ātma-Sākṣātkāra:

This realization may be referred to as self-realization if one desires, but if examined carefully, the very term "self-realization" is meaningless. The *ātman* is always directly present. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* declares:

"Tell me of that Brahman which is directly and immediately known, that ātman which is within everything."

Since the *ātman*, which is the innermost essence of all beings, is our very nature, there is no veil separating us from it. The phrase *sākṣātkaraṇaṃ sākṣātkāraḥ*—"Realization is that which is directly perceived"—applies to things that are hidden by time, space, or objects.

For instance, a distant mountain can only be perceived after traversing the intervening land. If one plants a coconut tree today, waters it, and waits, the realization of its fruit will come only after eight or ten years. The landscape beyond a hill is visible only after crossing that hill. But what intervening country, what lapse of time, or what obstructing object exists between oneself and the *ātman*? One may realize something *other* than oneself—but what does it mean to "realize" oneself?

This is why the term *ātma-sākṣātkāra* (Self-realization) is nowhere found in Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya*. If the term appears anywhere, its meaning must align with what has been described here. Śaṅkara explicitly states:

"Na hi ātmā āgantukaḥ kasyacit—svayaṃsiddhatvāt" (Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 2.3.7) ("The *ātman* does not arrive newly for anyone, for it is self-established."); *"Na hi ātmā ātmanaḥ pramāṇam apekṣya sidhyati"* ("This *ātman* is not established by requiring any proof for itself."); *"Ātmā tu pramāṇādi-vyavahārāśrayatvāt prāg eva pramāṇādi-vyavahārāt sidhyati"* ("The *ātman*, being the very basis of all transactions such as means of knowledge, is established even prior to those transactions.")

Thus, when reconciling the teachings of *śruti*, the explanations of the *guru*, and our own direct experience, it becomes evident that the very term *ātma-sākṣātkāra* is without meaning.

Even after understanding that *śāstra-pratipatti* (scriptural understanding), *ācārya-pratipatti* (instruction from the teacher), and *ātma-pratipatti* (direct Self-awareness) are in complete agreement, some may still protest: "If realizing the *ātman* were this simple, why did the *ṛṣis* describe it as such a difficult task?"

To such people, there is nothing to say. If they insist on taking a roundabout route to their own home rather than the direct and near one, so be it!

The Proper Role of Sākṣātkāra:

It is not my claim that the word *sākṣātkāra* is entirely absent from the *Bhāṣya*. *Sākṣātkāra* is essential in the realm of *upāsanā* (meditative worship). Since *upāsanā* is based on conceptual visualization, firmness of conviction (*niṣṭhā*) is crucial for it. In this context, *sākṣātkāra* is an appropriate term, as Śaṅkara himself acknowledges in his *Bhāṣya*. I will revisit this topic when discussing *upāsanā*. [*Translator note:* In this book, we will use the English term Meditative Realization of Self-realization, achieved through kartr-tantra upāsana, as translation of *sākṣātkāra*. We will translate *ātma-jñāna*, the intuitive knowledge of Self, as Self-Knowledge.]

Leaving that aside, no *sākṣātkāra* is necessary for *ātma-jñāna* (Self-knowledge), nor is it even possible. There is indeed an experience of "I have known the *ātman*," but this simply means that the mind has assumed the form of the *ātman* itself, as already described. Even so, just as one who wakes from sleep recalls, "I slept peacefully, and I was unaware of anything at that time," so too does the enlightened one remember his *ātma-jñāna* with the mind itself. Thus, the face of one who has known the truth is serene and radiant. Their presence is peaceful. Seeing such a person is itself the direct vision of the Self. This is the true hallmark of *ātma-darśana* (seeing the Self. Translator note: All these statements about the knower of Self are said from an observer’s perspective).

14. Avidyā that goes away by Ātmajñāna

(12-8-1953)

Yesterday, I spoke a few words about *ātma-sākṣātkāra*. The *ātman* is the ever-present witness within us. It does not need to be established through contemplation or any means, for it is already self-established. Brahman, which is both immediate and ultimate, the *ātman* that pervades all things, is none other than our own essential nature. Since this is the case, *ātma-sākṣātkāra* (Self-realization) is a meaningless expression.

The Role of Vedānta as a Pramāṇa:

Then, one may ask: If the *ātman* is always self-established and does not require realization, how can Vedānta be considered a valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) regarding the Self? Didn't we earlier say that Vedānta removes ignorance (*avidyā*) about the Self? But now, if we claim that the Self is ever-established and requires no realization, isn't there a contradiction?

The answer has already been given. The ultimate conclusion is that the Self is the ever-witnessing principle, requiring no new knowledge. However, those accustomed to perceiving from a worldly standpoint do not recognize that they are of the nature of this eternally self-established witnessing consciousness. To instruct them, we speak in terms of *avidyā-vyavahāra*—the transactional framework of ignorance.

Consider this: you believe yourself to be a knower (*pramātṛ*), using a means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) to comprehend an object (*prameya*), do you not? This very perception is due to *avidyā*. When knowledge arising from Vedānta removes this ignorance, one realizes one’s true nature. Then, one proclaims: "I have always been of the nature of the eternally established witnessing consciousness, yet only now, through the teaching of Vedānta, has this become clear to me." This is what we call *ātma-jñāna* (Self-Knowledge).

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* declares:

"The Self is not visible to the eye or any sense organ; only the subtle seers, who possess a refined intellect, grasp the Self."

We must not forget that this "grasping" of the Self and the removal of ignorance both belong to the domain of ignorance (*avidyā-vyavahāra*).

The Method of Understanding the Self:

Within this transactional framework, our *antaḥkaraṇa* (inner instrument) initially functions to grasp the nature of the Self. By following the guidance of the *śāstra* and the *ācārya*, it gradually transcends its own limitations and attains *amanastā* (no-mind); it dissolves into the Self itself. At that point, the awareness arises that the Self alone is the truth. However, this entire process is spoken of only from the standpoint of *vyavahāra* (empirical transaction).

Then, how did ignorance come to exist in the Self? If the Self is eternally pure and self-established, how could *avidyā* ever arise in it?

The Illogicality of Mūlāvidyā:

What is *avidyā* (ignorance) for the Self, which is of the nature of pure awareness? How could one imagine that the Self, which is ever luminous, one day mistakenly identified itself and deluded itself as an knower (*pramātṛ*)? For this to occur, the Self would have already had to be a knower beforehand! This leads to a logical inconsistency.

To avoid this difficulty, later Vedāntins introduced the doctrine of *mūlāvidyā* (root ignorance). According to this theory, the very notion of "I am the knower" (*ahaṃ pramātā*) is *kāryāvidyā* (effect-ignorance), which is of the nature of illusion (*bhrānti)*. But, they argue, behind this effect-ignorance, there must be a *cause*—an *anādi-avidyā* (beginningless ignorance) that somehow "depends" on the Self and veils it. This underlying ignorance is what they call *mūlāvidyā*.

They further claim that due to this *mūlāvidyā*, we mistakenly believe ourselves to be limited knower (*pramātṛ*). And, when asked when or why this *mūlāvidyā* arose, they evade the question, asserting that it is beginningless (*anādi*) and perpetually coexists with the Self as a dependent factor. They even claim that this doctrine aligns with Śaṅkarācārya's teachings.

However, this theory contradicts reason and experience (*anubhava*) on multiple levels:

1. There is no experience indicating the presence of *mūlāvidyā*. Even among its proponents, there are significant disagreements regarding its nature. Many Vedāntins—especially those outside Advaita—reject this concept outright. Moreover, ordinary worldly people are completely unaware of such an entity.

2. If *mūlāvidyā* is the cause and the sense of being an knower (*pramātṛtva*) is its effect, then the cause-effect relationship must be real. This means that the fundamental principle that a cause must always precede its effect must be accepted. If so, *mūlāvidyā* must have existed in time prior to *kāryāvidyā*, meaning *mūlāvidyā* itself has temporal existence, contradicting its supposed transcendental

nature.

3. If *mūlāvidyā* is the causal ignorance that "veils" the Self, then time, which underlies both cause and effect, must also be real. But time itself is part of the realm of ignorance! If one insists that *mūlāvidyā* is beyond time yet still causes temporal ignorance, this results in an incoherent position.

4. If *mūlāvidyā* is impermanent and subject to change, then it should eventually disappear even without knowledge. If ignorance were like any other impermanent entity, it would naturally dissolve on its own over time, making Self-Knowledge (*jñāna*) unnecessary.

5. If *mūlāvidyā* continuously transforms into different forms, then it follows the non-Vedic doctrine of *pariṇāma-vāda* (the doctrine of real transformation), which is accepted by Sāṃkhya but rejected by Advaita Vedānta. This would mean that *avidyā* behaves like Sāṃkhya's *pradhāna*, an evolving fundamental substance, leading to an un-Vedāntic conclusion.

Now, we must keep in mind that even *Ācārya Śaṅkara* does not accept the arguments of later Vedāntins regarding *avidyā*. Nowhere in his commentaries on the three *prasthāna*s (Upaniṣads, *Bhagavad Gītā*, and *Brahma Sūtras*) does he mention the concept of *mūlāvidyā* as an independent entity. The *avidyā* he refers to is simply a form of false knowledge (*mithyājñāna*), or erroneous cognition (*viparīta-jñāna*).

For instance, in his *Bhāṣya* on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, he writes:

"Yathā gṛhyamāṇāyāṃ śuktikāyāṃ viparyayeṇa rajatābhāsāyāḥ agrahaṇaṃ viparīta-jñānavyavadhānamātraṃ, tathā grahaṇaṃ jñānamātrameva; viparīta-jñānavyavadhānāpohārthatvāt jñānasya | Evam ihāpi ātmano'lābho'vidyā-mātra-vyavadhānam | Tasmād vidyayā tadapohanamātrameva lābhaḥ, nānyaḥ kadācid upapadyate." (Bṛ. Bh. 1.4.7)

"Just as when a shell is perceived, but due to an error, it appears as silver, the non-recognition of its true nature is merely due to the obstruction of wrong knowledge (viparīta-jñāna), and its correct recognition is nothing but the removal of that obstruction—because knowledge is required only for removing the obstruction of false cognition—similarly, here too, the non-recognition of the Self is only due to an obstruction in the form of avidyā. Therefore, the attainment of the Self is nothing but the removal of that avidyā by knowledge; no other attainment is possible."

Characterization of Avidyā in Śaṅkara's Works:

Similarly, in his *Adhyāsa Bhāṣya* (the introduction to the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*), Śaṅkara clearly defines *avidyā* as the mutual superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of the Self and the non-Self. The essence of his explanation is this:

Unless one falsely identifies the body as "I" and the senses as "mine," the state of being an experiencer (*pramātṛtva*) never arises in the unattached Self. The non-Self, such as the body and senses, has only a superficial (*ādhyāsika*) relationship with the Self; no intrinsic relationship can exist or even be conceived.

The Self is pure consciousness (*cit-svarūpa*), while the body and senses are inert (*jaḍa, acetana*). The Self is of the nature of truth, (*sat svarūpa*) while the non-self (body, senses) are false appearances (*mithyā)*, like shadows or reflections. That which remains constant and unchanging is real (*satya*); that which undergoes change is unreal (*anṛta*).

Śaṅkara affirms this in his *Taittirīya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* (2.1) and *Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* (2.16), stating that the body, senses, and mind are unreal because they undergo transformation (*vyabhicarati)* even within the waking state and disappear in deep sleep. Moreover, even when they appear, they do so only by depending on the Self; they do not have independent existence. This perspective, which explains the non-self as lacking independent reality, is the basis for Śaṅkara's use of the term *tattvānanyābhyām anirvacanīye*, indescribable either as Self or different from Self.

How Later Vedāntins Misinterpreted Anirvacanīyatā:

The term *anirvacanīya* used by Śaṅkara to describe the non-Self later became the foundation for the *anirvacanīya-avidyā-vāda*—the theory that *avidyā* itself is indefinable. This theory, accepted by post-Śaṅkara Vedāntins, claims that *avidyā* has no beginning, depends on the Self, and makes the Self its object. They argue that *avidyā* is: 1) Neither *sat* (real) nor *asat* (unreal); 2) Neither different from the Self nor identical to it; 3) Neither composed of parts *(sāṁśa)* nor without parts (*niramśa*).

But such a theory leads to logical contradictions. If *avidyā* were *sat* (real), it should exist eternally like the Self. If it were *asat* (unreal, it would never appear at all. If it were both *sat* and *asat*, it would seem self-contradictory. If it were different from the Self, it would be an independent entity, violating non-duality. If it were non-different, it would be the Self itself, which contradicts the nature of Brahman. Both positions are mutually contradictory. If avidyā were constituted of parts (*sāṁśa)*, it would necessarily be impermanent and self-destruct. If it were partless (*niramśa)*, it would not admit of gradual removal, and there could be no degrees in its elimination. To claim that it is both possessing parts and partless is also contradictory. Thus, avidyā is said to be *anirvacanīya* (indescribable), meaning that it is a certain entity that cannot be definitively described as real or unreal. This is the position of these later Vedāntins.

This doctrine of *anirvacanīya-avidyā* is not found anywhere in Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya*, nor does it hold up to rational inquiry or experience. Citing Śruti in support of this doctrine is meaningless, because Śruti cannot reveal what does not exist; its function is to reveal what exists. Therefore, one must firmly conclude that the very assertion that avidyā exists is itself avidyā.

Śaṅkara's Actual Teaching on Avidyā:

Let this be set aside for now. The ignorance (*avidyā)* described by the Āchārya is of the nature of mutual superimposition (*adhyāsa*) between the Self (*ātman*) and the non-Self (*anātman*). The Self is the ultimate truth (*satya*), while the non-self is false (*mithyā*). Yet, we mix up these two and, due to erroneous perception, take the body, senses, and the world itself to be absolute truth (*pāramārtha*). This ignorance is akin to the mistaken cognition of a person believing their own shadow to be themselves.

The body and the world are always apparent to everyone—just as no one fails to see their reflection in a mirror. Similarly, even a *Jīvanmukta* (one who is liberated while living)

perceives the body and the world. A child, for some time, believes that the reflection it sees in the mirror is another real child. However, as it matures and attains true understanding, it realizes that the reflection is merely an appearance. Is this not so? In the same way, for one who has attained knowledge through the Vedāntic texts (*vākya jñāna*), the body and the world are understood to be mere appearances, devoid of any ultimate reality in this form. With this realization, there arises the firm conviction that the Self (*ātman*) alone is the absolute reality (*paramārtha-satya)*. This is the meaning of the statement that ignorance (*avidyā)* is destroyed by knowledge (*vidyā*).

Signs of Avidyā-Removal and the Nature of True Knowledge:

What is the sign that *avidyā* has been removed and *Advaita-jñāna* has arisen? Even after they have completely gotten rid of the understanding that duality is real (*satyatva buddhi*), many people go out to argue with the dualists, saying, "We will establish Advaita." Can it truly be said that their sense of being a knower (*pramāṭṛ-buddhi*) has disappeared? After all, engaging in arguments assumes duality! We must look at this calmly. Advaitins are not those who have merely read many books; it is also quite ridiculous to say that just as a donkey's foal is a donkey and a horse's foal is a horse, and hence, advaitins are born in the wombs of advaitins.

Śrī Gauḍapāda clarifies this in the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*: *"Advaitaṃ paramārthaṃ hi dvaitaṃ tad vijñāyata | teṣām ubhayathā dvaitaṃ tena ayaṃ na virudhyate ||"* (Māṇḍūkya Kārikā 3.18)

"Advaita is the ultimate reality, while duality is merely an appearance imagined within it. But for dualists, reality is dual and appearance is also dual. Thus, our position does not contradict theirs. (MKā 3.18)" How can the duality arising on account of a mirror image be opposed to the supreme principle that the face is one! Śaṅkara himself says in his *Bhāṣya*: *"Since duality is not ultimately real, Advaita is not opposed to it. Suppose someone riding a wild elephant says, 'I am also on an elephant! Release your elephant towards me!' Would one take such a mad man seriously? Similarly, the knower of the Self (ātma-jñānī) is the very Self for all dualists, so Advaita can never be opposed to their view."* Therefore, a Vedāntin who quarrels with dualists is actually disrespecting *Ācārya Śaṅkara*. Since without duality there can be no quarrel, such a person is actually a dualist, despite calling himself an Advaitin.

Avidyā is nothing other than the mistaken identification of the Self with the non-Self, leading to notions of "I" and "mine." There is no *avidyā* beyond this. Doubt and lack of knowledge (*saṃśaya* and *ajñāna*) can only be eradicated when this fundamental *avidyā* is removed. This *avidyā* does not exist in deep sleep (*suṣupti*), where neither the sense of "I" nor the triad of knower (*pramātṛ*), means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and object of knowledge (*prameya*) appears. This is not because the experiential nature of the Self is absent in deep sleep, but rather because there is no second entity separate from the Self. As the *Śruti* declares: *"na tu tad dvitīyam asti"* (Bṛ. Up. 4.3.25) ("There is no second entity there.")

Thus, the Self is devoid of duality. It is untouched by *avidyā* in the form of the mistaken identification of being a knower (*pramātṛtva*). The Self is of the nature of pure consciousness (*cin-mātra-svarūpa*). These assertions are thus established.

One should not mistakenly think that the Self is actually afflicted by *avidyā*, nor that it is literally "removed" by knowledge. The entire transactional framework (*vyavahāra*) of superimposition (*adhyāsa*) and subsequent sublation (*bādha*) of knowledge and ignorance exists only within the domain of *avidyā* itself. It is akin to a king who, in a dream, experiences twelve years of famine, becomes a beggar, carries a broken pot to collect gruel, begins drinking from it, only for an ox to knock it from his hands—at which point he screams in distress! Upon waking, the king realizes that he was never truly a beggar; the entire experience was an illusion. No one would say that the king "actually" became a beggar during the dream, nor that he had to "attain" his kingship anew upon waking.

Similarly, the mistaken sense of being a knower (*pramātṛtva*) is not truly attached to the Self, nor does it literally "disappear" when Self-Knowledge arises. Vedānta simply reminds us that this identification as a knower is false. When this understanding dawns, all the transactions of means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and object of knowledge (*prameya*) are sublated—just as the details of a dream become irrelevant upon waking. As *Ācārya Śaṅkara* states in his *Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* (2.69), the experience of duality is negated in the wake of Self-Knowledge.

The Scripture as the Ultimate Means of Knowledge:

Because the *śāstra* (scripture) serves as a means of knowledge in this way, only to negate itself in the end, *ācāryas* have called it *antya-pramāṇa* (the ultimate means of knowledge). The seeker learns from the scripture:

"You are not the knower (pramātṛ). The means of knowledge (pramāṇa) is not real, nor is the Self, in its true nature (svarūpa), an object to be known (prameya). The entire transaction of knower, means of knowledge, and object of knowledge is mere imagination."

Thus, the *śāstra* does not provide new knowledge about the Self. It only removes the erroneous superimposition of knowledge and ignorance.

Someone might ask: "If *śāstra* does not create new knowledge, why do we say that 'knowledge arises from the scriptures'?" The answer is this: As the seeker contemplates the teachings of Vedānta, the mind (*antaḥkaraṇa*) becomes progressively refined. Eventually, it reaches the state of *amanastā* (no-mind). In the mind of such a person, a unique thought (*vṛtti*) arises (removing all ignorance). In this thought, the reflected consciousness of the Self (*cidābhāsa*) shines forth. Since the arising of this thought occurs at a particular moment in time, it has come to be called conventionally as *ātma-jñāna* (Self-Knowledge).

However, if we analyze this carefully, it becomes clear that *jñāna* is none other than the very nature of the Self. Just as the moon becomes visible when the clouds disperse, Self-awareness is ever-present—it is simply obscured by ignorance. When the ignorance is removed, Self-awareness is immediately recognized. From this standpoint, every act of knowledge—whether of a pot, a cloth, or any other object—is simply the eternally present witness-consciousness (*sākṣī-caitanya*) illuminating an object. However, due to ignorance, people fail to distinguish between this ever-present awareness and the transient mental modifications (*vṛttis*) that occur within it. The inability to distinguish between the two leads to the illusion that "new" knowledge is arising.

Śaṅkara discusses this principle of *phala-jñāna* (result-knowledge) in detail in the second chapter of the *Upadeśa Sāhasrī* (prose section). Based on this, *Sureśvarācārya* also affirms:

"Parāgartha prameyeṣu yā phalana sammatā | Samvit saiveha meyortho vedāntokti pramāṇataḥ ||" (*Br. U. Saṃ.Vā. 159*)

"That which is regarded as the result in the realm of external objects—that very same thing is the Self-nature, which is the object known through Vedānta's scriptural authority."

This verse is repeated multiple times in *Sureśvarācārya's Vārtika* to emphasize the idea that *knowledge*—as we conventionally understand it—is merely a recognition of what has always been the case.

The Final Understanding of Self-Knowledge:

Thus, when someone says, "I have attained intuition of the Self (*ātmānubhava*)," what they are expressing is merely a modification of the intuition of Self (*anubhava-ābhāsa)* that occurs at the level of the mind. But in reality, true intuition of the Self (*ātmānubhava*) is not something newly attained—it is the very nature of the Self.

It must be ascertained that in the highest sense, there is no knowledge (*jñāna*) or ignorance (*ajñāna*) regarding the Self and the Self is always self-evident.

15. *Śāstrayonitva* of the Supreme Self

(13-8-53)

The statements of Vedānta remove ignorance about the already existing reality and culminate in direct understanding. In this sense, they function as a valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), but not because they turn the Self into an object of knowledge. This has already been explained in various ways. A signpost on a road does not *create* a path; it merely indicates direction and distance. Similarly, scripture (*śāstra*) remains neutral, simply advising: *"Look from this perspective, and you will recognize that you are indeed the non-dual Supreme Self."*

This is Śaṅkarācārya's position. Scripture does not function as an authority that demands belief merely because it is spoken by great sages; rather, it is to be trusted because it is eternally *apauruṣeya*—not of human origin. Even so, this is not the ultimate conclusion of the *ācāryas*.

The Meaning of Śāstra-Yonitvāt:

The *Brahma Sūtra* declares that the Self is *śāstra-yonitvāt* (*Brahma Sūtra* 1.1.3). The term *śāstra-yoni* has two meanings:

1. That which is revealed by the scripture.
2. That which is the source (*yoni*) of the scripture itself.

It is necessary to elaborate on this second meaning.

The Origin of Language and the Eternal Nature of the Vedas:

How does language arise in the world? Every speaker uses words to communicate their thoughts. Modern thinkers have proposed various theories about the origin of language.

Some claim that early humans first communicated through instinctive cries and gradually developed speech (*interjectional theory*). This theory finds a parallel in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, which narrates that when *Hiraṇyagarbha* attempted to consume the newborn cosmic being (*Virāṭ*), the child let out a sound—*Bhāṇ*—which became speech.

Others imagine that language emerged through a social convention: "Let us agree to assign these words to these objects" (*conventionalist theory*). This corresponds to the *īśvara-saṅketa-vāda* (theory of divine convention) accepted by logicians, which holds that God wills particular words to signify particular meanings.

The *Mīmāṃsakas*, however, reject these views, asserting that the relationship between words and meanings is eternal, as is language itself. Kālidāsa reflects this idea when he poetically describes the eternal unity of speech (*vāk*) and meaning (*artha*):

"Vāgarthāviva sampṛktau…" ("Like word and meaning, inseparably united…")

Vedāntins accept this idea pragmatically, but their deeper view is distinct. They hold that the Vedas, being eternal, do not "originate" from any being, human or divine. Instead, they manifest from *Paramātman* as naturally as breath emerges from a living being.

Is the Self the Cause of Scripture?:

A question arises: If Śaṅkarācārya rejects causality in relation to *Brahman*, how can he argue that the Self is the cause of *śāstra*? Wouldn't that contradict his position?

According to Śaṅkara's reasoning, if *Paramātman* were the material cause (*upādāna kārana*) of the Veda, then the Veda could not be separate from *Paramātman*. This idea is supported by the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, which describes the *manomaya-ātman* (Self identified with the mind) as having the *Yajurveda* and other scriptures as its limbs. Śaṅkara explains this by stating:

"Mano-vṛtty-upādhi-paricchinnaṃ mano-vṛtti-niṣṭham ātmachaitanyam anādinidhanam yajuḥśabdavāchyam ātmavijñānam mantrāiti! ..evaṁ cha nityattopapattirvedānām |..... 'Sarve vedāyatraikaṁ bhavanti | sa mānasīna ātmā' iti ca śrutirnityātmanāikatvaṁ bruvanti ṛgādīnāṁ nityatve samañcasā syāt!' " ("That which is limited by the adjunct of mental activity, and based on mental activity.")

"The consciousness of the Self (*ātma-caitanya*), which appears as though limited by the adjunct (*upādhi*) of mental modifications (*mano-vṛtti*) and abides as though confined within those mental modifications, is beginningless and endless. This is what the word *yajuḥ* directly refers to (*vācya*), and this very *ātma-vijñāna* (knowledge of the Self) is called the *mantras*. Thus, the eternality of the Vedas is logically established. Furthermore, the *śruti* declares: *'All the Vedas become one in that which is the Self dwelling in the mind.'* By this, the scripture affirms the unity of the eternal Self (*nitya-ātman*), thereby justifying the eternality of the *Ṛg*, *Yajus*, and other Vedas."

Viewed in this way, the Vedas are one and the same, and *Paramātman* is also one and the same. That is why those who have completed the study of the Vedas (*Veda-adhyayana sampanna*) are revered as embodiments of the Vedas (*veda-mūrtis*). It is in this spirit that our elders have understood that offering worship to the Vedas is equivalent to worshipping *Paramātman*.

Further Explanation of the Bhāṣya's Intention:

Let us elaborate further on the intent of this *bhāṣya*. Every sentence serves to convey a particular meaning, but merely uttering the sentence does not in itself generate knowledge. Instead, upon hearing it, a corresponding mental modification (*vṛtti*) arises in the *antaḥkaraṇa* (inner instrument), which, in the presence of reflected consciousness (*cidābhāsa*), becomes suffused with awareness (*cid-vāpta*), thereby resulting in the knowledge of the intended object.

Here, the mere mental modification (*vṛtti*) does not possess the power to reveal the object independently; it must be accompanied by *cidābhāsa* (the reflection of consciousness). That very *cidābhāsa*, unlike other reflections, is what is called true knowledge (*jñāna*).

When poets like *Kālidāsa* describe objects such as the Himalayas to express their thoughts, the sentences they construct evoke in our minds the same mental modifications that existed in the poet’s own mind. Consequently, their intended meaning shines forth within us due to the consciousness (*chaitanya*) that underlies these mental modifications (*vṛtti-upahita-caitanya*).

Though the Vedas exist in the form of sentences, they are not intended to express the thoughts of any particular individual. Even so, they possess the power to evoke within us a great mental modification (*mahā-vṛtti*) that reveals *Paramātman*, just as a well-painted picture conveys its subject.

When this *vṛtti* arises, it absorbs within itself all other non-self (*anātma*) modifications and itself merges into *ātma-caitanya* (pure Self-awareness).

The Vedas as the Expression of the Supreme Self:

Everything ultimately merges into one. Since we stand in the Self (*Ātman*), which is pure consciousness, even this activity of knowing is referred to as the Vedas—this is the view of the *Ācārya*.

How does the Veda originate from the Self? Let us listen to the *śruti*:

"sa yathārdredhāgner abhyāhitāt pṛthag dhūmā viniscaranti | evaṁ vā are’sya mahato bhūtasya niḥśvasitam etad yad ṛgvedo yajurvedaḥ sāmavedo’tharvāṅgirasa itihāsaḥ purāṇaṁ vidyā upaniṣadaḥ ślokāḥ sūtrāṇy anuvyākhyānāni vyākhyānāny asya vaitāni niḥśvasitāni” (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.4.10).

"Just as smoke, embers, and sparks emerge separately from a blazing fire, so too do the Vedas—Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda—along with the Itihāsas, Purāṇas, sciences, Upaniṣads, hymns, aphorisms, commentaries, and explanations. These are like the breath of the Supreme Self."

Just as sparks emerge from fire, the Vedic sentences arise naturally, effortlessly, as a divine *līlā* (play). This means that the Vedas are not separate from the Supreme Self, just as sparks are not separate from fire. Therefore, when engaging with the Vedas, one must not view them as mere words—they are, in truth, the very expression of the Supreme Self.

Just as fire manifests differently in the form of embers, sparks, or smoke, the Supreme Self appears in different forms—sometimes as the Vedas, sometimes as the manifest world of names, forms, and actions. What we perceive as the world is not seen through the mind but through the illumination of the Self's consciousness. The *śruti* states, *"Ātmanaivāyaṁ jyotiṣāste"*—"By the light of the Self alone does all this shine." The Supreme Self reveals itself through the Vedas and is ultimately knowable as the Self.

To illustrate this, an incident is said to have occurred with Swami Rāmatīrtha. One of his disciples, possibly Swami Nārāyaṇa, once organized a conference. A visitor inquired, *"Where are the Swamijis?"* The disciple replied, *"Come tomorrow, and you will see them at the start of the gathering."* The next day, the visitor saw the same disciple fully dressed in his monastic attire and exclaimed, *"Aha! It was him all along! Though I saw him yesterday, I did not truly see!"*

Likewise, the Vedas instruct: *"Do not see me as mere words or as a function; understand me as the very form of the Supreme Self. Do not think of anything as separate from the Self—realize that everything is the Self!"*

The Vedas as the Means to Self-Revelation:

The Supreme Self first reveals its nature to us through the authority of the Vedas; then, through realization, it grants direct vision (*darśana*) of itself as the Self. This is what is meant by *śāstrayonitva*—the Supreme Self being both the source of the scriptures and that which is revealed through them.

Declaring that the Veda is the Self is not a mere philosophical construct of Śaṅkarācārya—the Vedas themselves proclaim this truth. If examined correctly, it aligns with direct experience.

Ordinary words serve to remind us of external matters, evoking particular thoughts and emotions. For instance, if a young man, believing himself to be wealthy, suddenly hears from a trusted source that his father is burdened with enormous debt, his pride instantly collapses. Conversely, if someone in deep distress is told by a trusted authority, *"You are not poor; you are born into wealth!"*, his despair turns into joy.

Similarly, when the Vedas declare, *"You are none other than the Supreme Self, you are Brahman itself"*, these words uplift the mind and cause the realization of the Supreme Self, who is bliss itself.

Unlike worldly witnesses, who may betray trust in a courtroom, the Vedas stand as the infallible witness, proclaiming:

"The Supreme Self is bliss."

That bliss, beyond speech and mind, is the essence of Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda's Universally Accepted Teaching. *"If that blissful Brahman is realized, fearless immortality is*

attained." And when this realization dawns, the Supreme Self, in the form of immortal, blissful *Paramātman*, grants His *darśana*.

May we and you drown in this ocean of bliss and rejoice!

The Simultaneity of Knowledge and Experience:

Upon hearing the words of the Vedas and attaining knowledge, there is no waiting for the experience of *Paramātman*. Just as darkness vanishes the moment the sun rises, the experience of the Self (*ātmanubhava*) occurs simultaneously with the knowledge conveyed by the Vedic statement (*mahāvākya-jñāna*).

Since *Paramātman* is experiential in nature, there is nothing additional to be realized.

One might wonder: *Isn't it contradictory to say that the experience of the Self happens immediately upon hearing the Vedic statement?*

But what is *ātmanubhava*? The Self *is* experience itself—I have already explained this. This experience appears as the culmination of the cognitive process initiated by the Vedic statement, and to that extent, it is valid to call it *experience*.

Consider the moon obscured by a cloud. When the cloud drifts away, the moon appears. Did the moon *become* visible at that moment, or was it always there? Similarly, the Self, which illuminates even the cognitive process, is the same Self that remains when the cognitive process is removed. The reflection of the Self's light in cognition does not *illuminate* the Self; rather, it is the Self that makes cognition possible.

This, properly understood, is what we call *ātmanubhava*. We must remember that referring to it as *experience* or *sākṣātkāra* is a figurative usage.

Since the Self is eternally established, statements declaring the realization of the Self are not self-contradictory.

For instance, if one says:

"My house is east of yours, but west of another house,"

it is not contradictory. The location remains the same, but its description depends on perspective.

The Ācārya's Final Teaching on Self-Knowledge:

Śaṅkarācārya illustrates the nature of Self-realization with the following verse at the conclusion of his commentary on the fourth *sūtra* of the *Brahma Sūtras*:

"gauṇamithyātmano'satte putradehādibādhanāt |
sahmātmāhamityevaṃ bodhe kāryaṃ kathaṃ bhavet ||"

"The body and other things are false selves because identifying them as the Self is a misconception. Once this false identification is negated, they no longer remain real. Sons and possessions are called secondary selves (gauṇa-ātman) because we identify with them while knowing they are distinct from us. But when one realizes that neither the body

nor possessions are the true Self, then the direct realization dawns that the Supreme Self (Brahmātman), the cause of all, is one's own true nature."

How does this realization occur?

It is by oneself, with oneself, that one understands oneself. There is no action of knowing, no instrument of knowledge, nor an external object of knowledge in this realization. Because this realization negates all divisions of action, agent, and result, we express it in words by saying, *"I know the Self."*

The *Vedānta-vākya* is not a *mantra*—it does not perform a supernatural feat, like a *garuḍa-mantra* that can restrain a cobra. Yet, for the qualified seeker, it is as potent as the most powerful mantra.

When one truly understands the teaching, one sheds all that is *not-Self* and realizes, *"I am the Supreme Self, the witness of all."*

Not only that—one also understands that the world of action, agent, and result is but an appearance, lacking independent existence.

The Vision of Nārāyaṇa Through Self-Knowledge:

In his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Śaṅkarācārya cites the following verse at the very beginning:

"Nārāyaṇaḥ paro'vyaktād aṇḍam avyakta-sambhavam |
Aṇḍasyāntas tvime lokāḥ saptadvīpā ca medinī ||"

"Nārāyaṇa is beyond the unmanifest (avyakta), and the cosmic egg (aṇḍa) arises from the unmanifest. Within this cosmic egg exist all these worlds and the earth with its seven continents."

Here, *Nārāyaṇa* is described as distinct from both the manifest and unmanifest worlds. However, when realized through the nature of the Self (*ātman*), the distinction between the manifest and unmanifest dissolves. The world that appears to exist externally is not separate from the Self; rather, this distinction itself is a matter of perception.

What appears as the world to ordinary people is nothing but *Paramātman* in the vision of the wise. Just as an elephant used in a temple procession is seen as merely an elephant by the crowd, but is known by the carpenter who built it as a structure of *Haluvana* wood, in the same way, through the eye of knowledge (*jñāna-cakṣu*) illumined by the words of Vedānta (*vedānta-vākya*), everything is recognized as the one indivisible Self (*ātman*). The *mahāvākya* does not transform the seeker into *Paramātman* through some mystical or miraculous process. It simply reveals that the seeker **has always been** the eternally established *Paramātman*.

Clarifying the Nature of *Ātma-Jñāna:*

I have explained the nature of *ātma-jñāna*—the Self-Knowledge that arises from the words of Vedānta (*vedānta-vākya*)—as I understand it, in accordance with the teaching of *Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda*. I have pointed out the flaw in the argument that a new *experience-of-self* (*ātma-anubhava*) truly occurs in this context—not as a dismissal, but

simply to highlight the precise nature of the method as expounded by the *Ācārya*. This clarification is offered not as an act of fault-finding, but as an attempt to underscore the significance of the process by which ignorance is removed, revealing the ever-present truth of the Self. That is my humble request.

16. The greatness of the Veda Vākya

(14-8-53)

The Unique Power of the Vedas:

Even though words seem to possess no inherent force, experience shows that they have a natural power to evoke particular states of mind in those who hear them. Whatever thought exists in the mind of the speaker, a corresponding impression arises in the mind of the listener as well! Merely by hearing a word, one's mind is lifted up or pulled down—what an extraordinary power this is!

Among all words, the Veda is unique—its potency is beyond comparison. But when did the Veda first appear? How did it come into being? Did someone compose it, or did it arise on its own? A definitive answer to these questions is not readily available. Archaeologists, approaching from a historical perspective, attempt to trace the origins of the Veda to the mouths of the *ṛṣis*. However, I do not find this question to be particularly important. Why? Because, what difference does it make whose mouth the Veda came from?

Even if the sacred waters of the Gaṅgā were brought to our village in someone's *kāvaḍi* (a portable water carrier), it would still be the Gaṅgā. Because it is the Gaṅgā, merely sprinkling it purifies us. Likewise, the Veda remains the Veda, regardless of its source. The defining characteristic of the Veda is that it reveals a reality that transcends time (*trikālātīta*). Therefore, attempting to determine its superiority or inferiority based on the time of its origin is meaningless.

Consider those who drive bullock carts in a fair. To keep themselves from falling asleep, they sing *lāvaṇi* (folk songs). The moment one begins to sing with melody, the various *rasas*—sorrow, valor, love, and so on—come alive in the mind of the listener. But when people listen, do they wonder who composed the *lāvaṇi* or when it was created? Such questions do not arise at that moment, do they? The subject of the *lāvaṇi* may be a past event or even a prophecy of a future transformation. Yet, just hearing it creates a strange, powerful impression in the mind!

However, the bliss that arises from hearing the Vedas is unlike that of ordinary songs. Even if one hears a single Vedic statement, one feels that there is a hidden, profound meaning within it. And when one understands its meaning, what is there left to say?

The *Purāṇas* and other scriptures seem secondary compared to the Veda. It is true that the *Purāṇas* contain teachings on the worship of Śiva, Viṣṇu, and other deities. But can those teachings compare to the declarations that the ultimate reality transcends all, that it is none other than your very own Self (*ātman*), and that it is beyond time (*trikālātīta*)? Can a mere song, even if sung beautifully, compare to the profound music of an accomplished musician? Can the *dāsa pada* sung with devotion by an ordinary singer, bound by fixed melody and rhythm, be equated with the effortless, free-flowing *rāga* of a master musician?

The Veda as the Eternal Breath of the Supreme:

It may be a matter of pride for us that the Veda emerged from the mouths of some *ṛṣis* in our land in ancient times. But this fact alone is not what makes the Veda significant. The *śruti* declares:

"Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda—these are the very breath of the Supreme Being! I and all these worlds have come forth from that Supreme Reality. If we look at our true essence, we are none other than That."

In which other scripture of any religion can such a sublime teaching be found?

When a great person, who has preached the highest truth for some time, passes away, we remember him for a long time. We revere his belongings—his books, the seat he sat on, his handkerchief, his sandals—and preserve them as memorials. From this perspective, how much greater must our reverence be for the Veda, which reveals the ultimate truth beyond time (*trikālātīta*)? How diligently must we protect and uphold it?

If a postman delivers a letter bearing joyous news, we sometimes reward him just for bringing that piece of paper. How much more, then, should we venerate those *adhyāpaka* (Vedic teachers) who transmit the message of supreme bliss into our ears! The Vedic Brahmins, who have preserved the Veda through ages of hardship, have handed down to us this sacred knowledge of the highest reality.

Our elders, recognizing this, used to honor them as *Veda-mūrtis*—"embodiments of the Veda." But now, we—especially Brahmins—have begun to look upon those who study and preserve the Veda with apathy and neglect. What a strange turn of events this is!

The Eternal Recitation of the Veda:

Even today, since time immemorial—since the era of the Ṛgvedic *ṛṣis*, whose antiquity remains undetermined—it remains one of the most extraordinary sights in the world that Brahmins have continued chanting the same *Gāyatrī*. Hidden within this divine mantra is an unfailing message of unparalleled depth. No matter how much we attempt to honor this message, it will never be enough.

"We meditate upon the divine effulgence of that Supreme Being, the cause of the universe; may He guide our intellect."

Oh! What an infallible invocation this is! The very Supreme Being who can lead our intellect on the right path still resides within our hearts. The One who guided the wisdom of the most ancient sages **is still here**, present within us—let us meditate upon Him! This is the eternal proclamation of the Veda.

Today, thousands of people perform *upākarma*; and in the coming full moon, many others will observe *upākarma* again. Through the recitation of Vedic *mantras*, by invoking and offering worship to the *mantradṛṣṭās*—the seers of the mantras who have preserved the unbroken lineage of Vedic transmission—even in a simple blade of *darbha* grass, they experience immense joy. What is the reason for their joy? It is the feeling that *"these ṛṣis are connecting us to the Veda, which is of the purest essence. They are remembering us!"*

The *ṛṣis* lived in simple dwellings—perhaps a leaf-covered hut in the forest, a dark cave, or the shade of a vast tree. Their attire was nothing but animal skins. Yet, they dedicated their entire lives to preserving the Vedas. They endured every hardship, holding their very breath to safeguard this sacred knowledge. What profound devotion to wisdom!

We do not worship the mere words that make up the Veda. The Veda is the outward manifestation of the Supreme Being. Worshipping the Veda is, in truth, worship of the Supreme Being. Therefore, it is our duty to protect the Veda, to study it, and to uphold the *karma* and *jñāna* enshrined within it as the means to attaining *puruṣārtha*—the ultimate goal of life.

The Role of Knowledge and Action in Human Life:

The Veda is the means to attaining knowledge of a transcendental reality. But what is the purpose of this knowledge? Any knowledge in the world must serve as an aid to some action. Through knowledge, a *saṃskāra* (impression) is created, which is later applied in practice.

For instance, consider a curious child who, not knowing the nature of fire, touches a glowing ember. The moment he touches it, his hand burns, leaving a scar. From that moment, he acquires the knowledge that fire burns and that one should never touch it directly. At the same time, he also realizes that fire is useful—it can warm milk, heat water, and cook food. Thus, different *saṃskāras* arise from different kinds of knowledge; each *saṃskāra* either encourages or discourages certain actions. In this way, knowledge serves as an aid to action.

What we call civilization is nothing but the accumulated *saṃskāras* formed from various kinds of knowledge. But just as knowledge leads to action, action too can lead to knowledge.

In the earlier example, the child's action of touching fire led to the knowledge that fire burns. This raises important questions:

- What action does the knowledge derived from the Vedas lead to?
- And conversely, what knowledge is gained through the actions prescribed in the Vedas?
- Is knowledge primary in human life, or is action primary?

This debate has existed for centuries.

A newborn baby instinctively moves its hands and feet. Even in old age, when one loses much of one's knowledge, these natural bodily movements remain. Some argue that this proves action to be primary in human life. On the other hand, others argue that all actions exist only to gain a certain experience, and once that experience is attained, action ceases. From this perspective, knowledge is the final goal. Let this debate remain unresolved for now.

The Final Goal of Vedic Knowledge:

The actions prescribed in the Vedas yield their respective results, leaving deep *saṃskāras* in the mind. These impressions cultivate a tendency toward further action, and the cycle

continues. From this perspective, one might say that *karma-jñāna* (knowledge gained through action) exists for the sake of actions.

However, if we shift our perspective, we find that the actions prescribed in the Vedas are themselves performed for the sake of *saṃskāra*. And this *saṃskāra* leads to a certain culminating knowledge.

When that knowledge arises, a profound realization dawns:

"I have nothing left to do. I am the very Self, beyond action."

The *śruti* and *smṛti* declare precisely this: The ultimate goal of Vedic knowledge is the realization that one's true Self (*ātman*) is beyond all action, beyond all dualities, and beyond all limitations.

The Role of Action and Knowledge in the Vedas:

Even though knowledge is the ultimate goal of the Vedas, action is necessary for ordinary people, as their intellect naturally inclines them toward effort and achievement. The Vedas, therefore, had to prescribe actions for such individuals. However, these actions are not ultimate in themselves; they serve as means to knowledge. The primary aim of the Vedas is to outline actions only for the sake of leading one toward knowledge.

Among all actions, yajña (sacrificial rites) holds the highest importance. Within the sacred assembly (*sadas*) conducted during a yajña, inquiry into Brahman (*Brahma-vichāra*) also takes place. We see this clearly in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, where the ultimate truth is revealed through the intense debates between Yājñavalkya and the learned brāhmaṇas at King Janaka's yajña. Observing this, it becomes evident that the goal of all the Vedas is Self-knowledge. This is affirmed in the Upaniṣadic statement:

"Sarve vedā yat padam āmananti"—"All the Vedas declare that Supreme state."

Vedānta and the Mahāvākyas:

Vedānta is the essence of the Vedas. The *Upaniṣads*, which constitute Vedānta, aim to reveal the Paramātman, who transcends the limitations of time (*trikālātīta*), as none other than our own Self. As the Upaniṣads state, if we truly look within, we realize that our innermost nature is indeed the one, unique Paramātman. The sentences that directly reveal this truth are now commonly called Mahāvākyas.

What is a Mahāvākya?

A *vākya* is a collection of words that conveys only as much meaning as is necessary. The traditional definition states:

"Yāvad vaktavyaṁ tāvad vākyaṁ"—"A sentence conveys precisely what needs to be said."

In the Upaniṣads, our Self (*ātman*) is first introduced (*pratipādita*), and then the final intent of the sentence is to establish that this Self is, in fact, Brahman. Any statement where this ultimate intent is revealed is called a Mahāvākya.

The term *Mahāvākya* does not refer to the length of the sentence. For example:

"Ayam ātmā brahma"—"This Self is Brahman"—is a Mahāvākya.

Here, "Ayam ātmā" refers to our immediate experience of the Self. Ordinarily, we perceive ourselves in a mundane sense—limited, bound by name and form. However, the *Mahāvākya* reinterprets this very Self as Brahman—the eternally pure, enlightened, and liberated reality (*nitya-śuddha-buddha-mukta-svabhāva*). That is why it is called a Mahāvākya.

To clarify the meaning of Mahāvākyas, the *śruti* provides subordinate sentences, but their primary intention is always to convey the truth encapsulated within the Mahāvākya.

Misinterpretation of the Mahāvākyas:

In modern times, the term Mahāvākya has taken on a symbolic significance, with some reducing their number to only one per Veda. Due to this perceived scarcity, a new practice has emerged—treating Mahāvākyas as though they were mantras. In *mantra-śāstra* (the science of mantras), each syllable or section of a mantra is mentally assigned to different parts of the body through rituals like *karanyāsa* (hand placement) and *hṛdayādinyāsa* (heart placement), followed by meditative chanting.

The identity of Brahman and Ātman (*Brahmātmakatva*), as established by Vedānta through Mahāvākyas, has now been mistakenly conflated with these mantra practices. As a result, new "*Vishvamitras*" have emerged—self-proclaimed scholars who have fabricated artificial *ṛṣi* (seer), *chandas* (meter), and *viniyoga* (usage) attributions for these Mahāvākyas, as if they were part of the ritualistic mantra system.

This misinterpretation reduces the Mahāvākyas to mere ritual formulas, stripping them of their true purpose—directing seekers toward self-knowledge. The Upaniṣads do not enjoin Mahāvākyas as mantras for recitation; rather, they reveal them as self-evident statements of truth meant for direct contemplation and realization.

The Misinterpretation of Mahāvākyas and the Role of Saṃnyāsa:

A humorous anecdote illustrates the absurdity of certain misguided traditions: It is customary to chant a mantra while pouring water over food before eating. A son, amused by this practice, questioned his father: *"Which water sprinkling (parishēncana) mantra do pigs, dogs, and other animals chant before their meals?"* This joke, though innocent, aptly parallels the distorted practice of treating the *mahāvākyas* as ritualistic mantras. Just as the boy pointed out the irrationality of attributing such customs universally, these so-called *mahāvākya* mantra enthusiasts fail to recognize how they invert the very principles of Śrī Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda. Their insistence on the ritualistic chanting of *mahāvākyas* lacks any scriptural basis and is nothing more than an innovation, resembling an imaginary tradition where people weep upon seeing a girl crying over the death of a son who never existed!

Even more bewildering is their audacity to prescribe the chanting of *mahāvākya* mantras to saṃnyāsins. This is difficult to comprehend because what is *saṃnyāsa*? It is the renunciation of all means and ends, the complete abandonment of desires.

The Three Worlds and the Renunciation of Action:

In the *karmakāṇḍa* (ritual section of the Vedas), three primary means of attainment are outlined: Sons (*putra*), Actions (*karma*), Contemplation (*upāsana*). Through these, one attains the three corresponding worlds: i) *Manuṣyaloka* (the world of humans) is conquered through the birth of a son; ii) *Pitṛloka* (the world of ancestors) is attained through actions; iii) *Devaloka* (the world of the gods) is reached through contemplation.

The *śruti* specifies how individuals should conduct rituals accordingly: The sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*) is worn on the right shoulder for divine rites. It is worn around the neck (*nivīta*) for human actions.It is worn on the left shoulder (*prācīnāvīta*) for ancestral rites. However, what about those who renounce all three paths—those who neither pursue action nor seek heavenly worlds? For them, saṃnyāsa is the path. A *saṃnyāsin* renounces all action, including the sacred thread itself, signifying that he has given up rituals and all worldly pursuits. His only purpose is Self-knowledge (*ātmajñāna*). The renunciation of the *yajñopavīta* symbolizes the transition into pārivrājya—the life of a wandering ascetic whose sole aim is to abide in the knowledge of the Self.

Unlike the other three *āśramas*—where individuals engage in study, sacrifices, charity, devotion to the guru, and austerities to accumulate merit—a *saṃnyāsin* has a different focus. He contemplates Omkāra, the essence of all Vedas, and thereby attains immortality, as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* states.

To forget this distinct role of *saṃnyāsa* and to impose upon it ritualistic practices, such as the chanting of *mahāvākyas* as mantras, is to contradict the very purpose of Vedānta.

The Danger of Reviving Questionable Practices:

This misinterpretation has led to the revival of non-scriptural rituals while neglecting those actually prescribed by the Vedas. Those who, having abandoned action, also fail to strive for knowledge, find themselves stranded—having neither worldly merit nor the realization of the Self. As the *śruti* warns, such individuals "perish on both fronts." This brief discussion is sufficient to highlight the issue.

The great Vedic statements (*mahāvākyas*) reveal a profound essence. Those who are truly qualified (*uttamādhikārīs*)—having cultivated calmness, self-control, and the other necessary virtues—upon hearing these statements, immediately grasp the realization "I am Brahman" (*brahmātmatva*).

This realization is not an external attainment but the direct recognition of one’s eternally pure, enlightened, and free nature (*nitya-śuddha-buddha-mukta-svarūpa*).

Thus, the *mahāvākyas* embody the miraculous power of words—not as chants to be ritualistically repeated, but as revelations that dissolve ignorance and awaken direct Self-knowledge.

17. Knowledge arising from the Great Vedic Statements

(15-8-53)

Some misunderstand the meaning of *mahāvākya*, or "great Vedic statement." The *Upaniṣads* contain the ultimate teaching, and it is this highest wisdom that constitutes the

mahāvākya. Once self-knowledge (*ātmajñāna*) arises from it, nothing remains to be done or understood. At that point, our true nature is directly realized as:

"Unborn, without sleep, without dreams, without name, without form. Always shining, all-knowing, and absolutely free from all limitations."

(ajamanidramasvapnamanāmakamarūpakam | sakṛdvibhātam sarvajñam nopacāraḥ kathaṃcana)
— Gauḍapāda Kārikā (3.3.6)

This awareness—the realization of the Self as the eternally pure, enlightened, and free reality—destroys all ignorance (*avidyā*). Consequently, no duties (*kartavyatā*) remain, as affirmed by Śrī Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda and his *paramaguru* Śrī Gauḍapāda. Thus, those who treat the *mahāvākya* as a mantra for chanting contradict both the principles and direct experience of the *ācāryas*. They distort Vedānta by subordinating its knowledge to karma (action), a mistake we have already examined.

The Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Perspective: The Need for Prescribed Action:

The *Pūrva Mīmāṃsakas*—those who uphold the primacy of Vedic rituals—maintained that for a Vedic statement to be meaningful, it must prescribe action. According to them, a valid scriptural sentence must specify:

1. What is to be done (*kartavya*)
2. The means to achieve it (*sādhanā*)
3. The method of performing it (*vidhi*)

If a statement lacks these directives, it is not considered valid scripture. Thus, the *Mīmāṃsakas* argue:

- Any Vedic statement must prescribe some action (*karma*).
- If a sentence does not contain a command, it has no independent meaning.
- Statements about Brahman, the Self, or creation—which merely describe reality—must either be meaningless or merely serve as *arthavāda* (praise) to support karma.

For example, the *śruti* states: *"sorōdīt"*—meaning *"Rudra cried."*

This is a historical statement, not a command. But according to *Mīmāṃsā* logic, scripture must always prescribe action, so they reinterpret such statements as either explanatory or reaffirming (*anuvāda*) or praise (*arthavāda)*. They say, the same reasoning applies to sentences about Brahman, the Self, and creation; and since these statements do not command any action, the *Mīmāṃsakas* argue they must be auxiliary statements that praise karma, rather than independent means of knowledge.

Vedāntins Influenced by Mīmāṃsā:

Some *Vedāntins*, influenced by the *Mīmāṃsā* emphasis on karma, wrongly concluded that the Upaniṣads also prescribe actions.Their reasoning was as follows: i) Karma is the cause of attaining human goals (*puruṣārtha*); ii) some karmas must be chosen over others to achieve the highest goal; iii) Vedānta must also teach karma because *puruṣārtha* cannot be attained without it. This peculiar opinion reveals a deep attachment to karma. It is like a

horse lamenting: *"How can humans be happy? They don't even have a whip!"* Just as a horse assumes that happiness is impossible without external control, those bound by attachment to karma assume that the highest goal is impossible without action.

Vedāntic Methods of Worship - A Misinterpretation:

Some Vedāntins argue that Vedānta does not merely reveal Brahman as an object of knowledge but also teaches methods of worship (*upāsanā*). For example, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states:

"ātmāvā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ"
— The Self should be realized through hearing, reflection, and meditation.

According to these Vedāntins, this command implies that one must worship the Self through specific practices. Thus, they conclude: The Upaniṣadic sentences do not merely describe the Self; they prescribe a means to attain it; this creates a desire for worship; and the Vedānta statements about the Self are thus not merely informative but prescriptive.

This view, however, contradicts the core teachings of Advaita Vedānta. The Mahāvākyas are not meant to prescribe *sādhanā* (practice); rather, they directly reveal the eternally established truth of the Self.

The True Function of Vedānta: Knowledge, Not Action:

The true purpose of Vedānta is to remove ignorance, not to prescribe new actions. The realization "I am Brahman" (*ahaṁ brahmāsmi*) is not an action to be performed, but a fact to be recognized. Once this knowledge arises, no further effort is needed. There is no command, no ritual, no karma—only the direct recognition of the Self.

Thus, Vedānta does not instruct worship, nor does it prescribe any action. Instead, it reveals the eternal truth of the Self—that which has always been and always will be.

The Misinterpretation of Mahāvākyas as Karma and the Absolute Authority of Knowledge:

"Kuśaṃ vā kāśaṃ vā avalamba"—a Sanskrit saying meaning "A drowning man will clutch at a straw"—aptly describes the desperation of certain Vedantins who insist on binding the *mahāvākyas* (great Vedic statements) to *karma*. Because the Upaniṣadic injunction "draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyaḥ" appears in a chapter on knowledge, not in a section on *karma* or *upāsanā*, these disputants twist its meaning, stubbornly arguing that it prescribes a form of worship (*upāsanā*) and that self-knowledge (*ātmajñāna*) is merely a component of this prescribed practice.

They concede that self-knowledge is not part of external karma, but argue that it must at least be a remainder (*śeṣa*) of *upāsanā*, treating it as a mental action. With this attachment to *karma*, they reframe *draṣṭavya* (*"must be seen"*) as a rule, refusing to acknowledge that knowledge is its own means and its own end. Their mindset is so fixated on action that they cannot accept a sentence without a verb—they assume that all sentences must prescribe action, dictating "this should be done, by this means, in this way."

Śaṅkarācārya's Response: Knowledge Is Not an Action:

How did Śrī Śaṅkarācārya address these distortions?

He pointed out that **sentences of knowledge do not require verbs of action**. For example:

- *"This Self is Brahman."*
- *"Everything is the Self."*

In such sentences, the meaning of the words resides in revealing the object itself. These are descriptive, not prescriptive, because the Self is beyond action, agency, and results. The Self is neither a *kartā* (doer) nor a *karma* (act).

Moreover, the *śruti* (Vedas) explicitly states that Brahman is not the object of worship (*upāsanā*). If *mahāvākyas* were commandments, they would contradict the very nature of Brahman. The truth of the Self cannot be "done" or "undone", making it incompatible with karma.

Furthermore, the purpose of *śāstra* (scripture) is not to prescribe action but to dispel ignorance. The *śruti* proclaims that knowledge liberates one from ignorance, desire, and karma, and this is experientially evident. Therefore, it is incorrect to argue that Vedānta sentences are meaningful only if they prescribe action.

The Error of Linking Self-Knowledge to Karma:

Some Vedantins, still clinging to karma, attempt to insert it into the discussion by suggesting that self-knowledge itself must be applied as a type of karma.

Their argument proceeds as follows. “The belief ‘I am the doer, I am the enjoyer’ is ancient. How can that ignorance vanish simply because the scripture says ‘Tat Tvam Asi’ once? Ignorance (*avidyā*) of external objects is temporary and disappears once knowledge arises, but beginningless ignorance of the Self may return. Even enlightened beings sometimes show attachment. Thus, knowledge alone is insufficient; repeated contemplation (*prasaṃkhyāna*) is needed to completely eradicate ignorance.”

They compare this process to a thief escaping from the policeman—where a weak attempt to capture ignorance will fail unless a strong force (*prasaṃkhyāna*) is used.

Śaṅkarācārya’s Refutation of Prasaṃkhyāna:

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya refutes this idea in the *Upadeśasāhasrī*, and Sureshvarācārya refutes it in his *Bṛhadāraṇyakavārtika*.

Their response is clear: 1) Knowledge always overcomes ignorance—once knowledge arises, ignorance cannot overpower it again. 2) If ignorance could remain after true knowledge arises, then such knowledge would not be true knowledge at all. 3) Knowledge and ignorance are not of equal power—ignorance is merely the absence of knowledge, and when knowledge arises, ignorance vanishes permanently.

To assume that ignorance persists even after knowledge arises is as absurd as imagining that light drives away darkness, but darkness comes back to fight the light. Or it is like thinking a tiger, shot dead from a distance, suddenly revives and pounces on the hunter, or a dead rat kills a cat. If knowledge has truly arisen, ignorance is destroyed, period.

The Finality of Mahāvākyas: No Room for Karma:

A *mahāvākya* (great statement) is a sentence that directly reveals the truth of non-duality. Once this knowledge arises—that our own self is Brahman, eternally free from *saṃsāra*—the sentence's purpose is fulfilled.

Just as an ordinary sentence provides knowledge of its subject upon understanding, the Vedantic statement provides knowledge of Brahman.

Because knowledge of the non-dual Self arises directly from the meaning of the sentence, there is no room for karma.

Why Mahāvākyas Cannot Be Used as Mantras:

Some individuals, misunderstanding the nature of knowledge, treat the *mahāvākya* as a mantra for japa (repetition), believing that repeating it mechanically will lead to realization. This completely misses the point of Vedānta. The *mahāvākya* is not a prescription for an action—it is an immediate revelation of truth. Using it for ritualistic chanting is as ridiculous as using an instruction manual for meditation instead of actually meditating. Once true knowledge arises, there is no need for further repetition or contemplation. The seeker realizes their eternal nature as Brahman and no longer engages in any effort.

Thus, Śaṅkarācārya firmly rejects the notion that knowledge is a gradual process requiring repetitive karma. Once the Self is known, the very need for action disappears, as there is nothing further to achieve.

18. Direct Knowledge from the Mahāvākya

(16-8-53)

Sentences that reveal the unity of Brahman are called *mahāvākyas*. As previously discussed, it is incorrect to treat these statements as mere mantras for *japa* or to regard the knowledge they impart as instrumental in nature. The *prasaṃkhyānavādins* acknowledge that knowledge is the direct means to *puruṣārtha* (ultimate fulfillment), yet they argue that the initial knowledge derived from the *mahāvākya* is insufficient to completely remove ignorance. According to them, the sentence may generate a general understanding, but not the ultimate Self-knowldge.

For instance, if someone declares, "I have a stomach ache," another person may generally comprehend the situation by observing facial expressions or physical discomfort. However, the exact nature of the pain remains known only to the one experiencing it. Similarly, they argue that *mahāvākyas* provide only an indirect understanding (*parokṣajñāna*), whereas direct knowledge (*aparokṣajñāna*) cannot arise solely from hearing a sentence.

They further illustrate their position by stating: "If someone tells us that Mount Meru exists in the north, can we truly claim direct knowledge of the mountain?" Therefore, they insist that Vedantic sentences and reasoning must be revisited continually. Even if one grants that direct knowledge of Brahman arises from *śruti*, they argue that the long-standing identification with *saṃsāra*—reinforced by perception and habitual cognition—can overpower this realization. Hence, they advocate for repetition and reinforcement of knowledge to secure its permanence. They cite the *śruti* statement: *Vijñāya prajñāṃ*

kurvita—"Having understood, one must cultivate wisdom"—as evidence that, after realization, a further process of deep assimilation (*prasaṃkhyāna*) is necessary.

This is the argument put forth by those who promote *jñānābhyāsa* (the repeated practice of knowledge).

The Argument for Saṃsṛṣṭārtha and the Need for Contemplation:

A further claim made by these and other scholars is that direct knowledge of realization (*aparokṣajñāna*) does not arise immediately from the *mahāvākya*. Their reasoning is based on the nature of sentence comprehension. A sentence conveys knowledge by relating (*sambandha*) different elements (*padārthas*). Consider the example: "The potter makes a pot from clay using tools." Here, the potter is the agent (*kartā*), the clay is the material (*kāraṇa*), the tools are the instruments (*karaka*), and the pot is the resultant object (*kārya*). The sentence describes the interrelation of these factors (*saṃsarga)*, forming what is known as *saṃsṛṣṭārtha*—a meaning that arises from the combination or synthesis of various relational elements.

Similarly, *mahāvākyas* like *Aham Brahmāsmi*—"I am Brahman"—express the relationship between the words *aham* (I), *Brahman*, and *asmi* (am). However, the identity of Brahman and the Self is not a relational truth (*saṃsṛṣṭārtha*). It is not a synthesis of the meaning of distinct elements, like links in a chain. Since what arises from sentences is typically *saṃsṛṣṭārtha*, these thinkers claim that merely understanding the words does not produce an indivisible realization (*akhaṇḍārtha*). Instead, they argue that continuous practice of this sentence-knowledge eventually leads to *aparokṣānubhava*—direct, non-relational experience of the Self.

Thus, common to all of them is that direct realization cannot be attributed to the sentence alone.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's Refutation:

Śaṅkarācārya addresses these objections across his works. In *Upadeśasāhasrī*, he unequivocally states that the Self is the ever-witnessing *ātman*, the knower of all cognitive modifications (*buddhi-vṛttis*). The Vedantic declaration "That thou art" (*tat tvam asi*) does not create a new experience—it simply reveals what is already true. Any other supposed "experience" is false:

"Vijñāteryastu vijñātā sa tvamityucyate yataḥ | sa evānubhavastasya tato'nyo'nubhavo mṛṣā" (Upadeśasāhasrī 12.8). ("The Self is the ever-knowing knower. You are that. This alone is experience—any other experience is false.")

Furthermore, those who insist that Self should know first and then one should strive for experience of the Self, must necessarily take the Self as an object to be attained. However, Śaṅkara refutes this view, stating that if one argues that the Self must be realized as an object of experience, then the Self is mistakenly treated as an object (*viṣaya*) rather than as the witnessing subject (*sākṣī*). Since the Self is pure consciousness (*caitanyarūpa*), the knower of all experiences, it can never become an object of experience.

In the same text, Śaṅkara refutes the idea that *mahāvākyas* merely provide indirect knowledge. Revelation (*śruti*) is a means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) that dispels ignorance

by revealing what is already established. If *śruti* conveys a meaning that is not contradicted by perception or inference, how can one dismiss its authority and demand an additional experience to verify it? Śaṅkara firmly rejects the idea of an "experience beyond knowledge" by invoking the *śruti* statement: *"Vijñātāram are kena vijānīyāt?"* ("By what can the knower be known?") If knowledge itself reveals the Self, what other experience could be required?

He further asserts: "*ito'nyo'nubhavaḥ kaścidātmano nopapadyate ; avijñātaṃ vijānatāṃ vijñātāramiti śruteḥ"* (Upadeśasāhasrī 18.210). ("There is no experience of the Self beyond this knowledge; the *śruti* itself declares: 'It is not known by those who [say they] understand' (Ke. U. 2.3); and '(By what should one know) the knower?' (Br.U. 2.4.14)")

All those who advocate for a separate "Self-experience" (*ātma-anubhava*) distinct from knowledge must reconcile their position with this clear assertion of Śaṅkara.

On the Misunderstanding of Aparokṣajñāna and the True Nature of Self-Experience:

Even today, some Vedāntins persist in claiming that direct knowledge (*aparokṣajñāna*) of the Self cannot arise from sentences alone. They assert that disciplines like *yoga* and other spiritual practices are necessary for such realization. In doing so, they imply that one must make the Self an object of knowledge — as though the Self could be "grasped" in experience. This is not unlike a tailless dog spinning endlessly in an effort to bite its own tail — a futile and ill-conceived endeavor. The Self can never be an object of knowledge or action; it is the very ground of all knowing and doing. It is not *known*, but is the ever-present *knower*. It does not *shine* by anything else, but is the light by which all shines.

So what then is Self-experience (*ātma-anubhava*)? Ācārya answers this in a succinct verse:

dvaśirevānubhūyeta svanaivānubhavātmanā |
tadābhāsatayā janma dhiyo'syānubhavaḥ smṛtaḥ || (U.S. 18.193)

The Self, self-established witness, is of the very nature of intuitive experience (*anubhava svarūpa*), and therefore is experienced by none other than itself. Still, from an empirical standpoint, in the reflection (*cidābhāsa*) of the Self , there is a thought (*vrtti*) that forms upon hearing the sentence (*mahāvākya*), which is called *Self-experience* (*ātma-anubhava in vyavahāra*). But even this so-called "experience" remains an object illumined by the witnessing Self; it is not an experience *of* the Self in the same way we experience objects. True *ātma-anubhava* is the spontaneous, effortless intuition of the ever-luminous consciousness that transcends all sorrow and division.

It is thus a serious error, when viewed from the standpoint of *paramārtha* (absolute truth), to say that ignorance in the form of thoughts (vrtti-s) is "eliminated" by knowledge in the form of thoughts. The Self has no involvement in time or space, and so to speak of realization occurring at a particular hour, on a specific day, in a specific year, is sheer absurdity. One modern seeker even recorded in his diary: "On such-and-such a date, at such-and-such a time, I had *brahmānubhava*." A friend who read this quipped wryly, "Ah, so he must be the *Brahman* of that year!" Can a cloud ever truly cover the sun? Just as a profoundly deluded person may think that the sun itself has been eclipsed and its light extinguished when a cloud obstructs his view, so too do the ignorant imagine that the Self has become "veiled" by ignorance, and must be "revealed" through knowledge.

“ghanacchannadṛṣṭir ghanacchannam arkaṃ yathā manyate niṣprabhaṃ cātimūḍhaḥ”

As Sureśvarācārya declares in *Naiṣkarmyasiddhi*, when rightly seen, there is neither real ignorance to be removed nor new knowledge to be attained — for the Self was never not known. That which is always shining cannot be unveiled; only the false perception must be corrected.

On Abiding in the Self-Knowledge: The Gītā Bhāṣya on the Nature of Brahmavidyā:

But how then should one gain this right knowledge (*samyak jñāna*? In the *Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya*, Śaṅkarācārya gives a penetrating answer:

“avidyādhyāropaṇanirākaraṇamātraṃ brahmaṇi kartavyam, na tu brahmavijñāne yatnaḥ | atyanaprasiddhatvāt...” (Gītā Bhāṣya 18.50)

Only the removal of false attribution (*adhyāropa*) is required in Brahman; no *effort* is needed to “know” Brahman anew — for Brahman is not unknown. It is, in fact, the most self-evident of realities. But for those whose intellect has been hijacked by the names and forms, conjured by ignorance (*avidyā kalpita namarupa)*, even the most intimate and self-evident reality appears distant, obscure, and alien. What is the Self — the innermost, most familiar reality — appears to them as the farthest, most unknowable truth. For such people, Śaṅkara says, the Self appears: extremely unfamiliar (*atyanaprasiddha*), difficult to discern (*durvijñeya*), farther than far (*atidūram*), and as though it were something else (*anyadiva*).

But for those whose minds have been withdrawn from external diversions, and who are blessed by the grace of the Guru and Paramātman, there is nothing more evident, nothing more clear, and nothing more intimate than the Self.

This passage from the *Gītā Bhāṣya* powerfully affirms the self-revealing nature of *ātmatattva*. No external confirmation is needed. The Self is *svataḥsiddha* — established by itself.

The Mind: The Unruly Horse:

Yet what is the nature of the mind, which seeks knowledge of the Self?

It is like a restless and undisciplined horse. Like a spoiled child full of conceit, it claims everything as “mine” and “me.” It becomes absorbed in the external and forgets its source. It turns outward and chases shadows, unable to recognize the very light by which it sees.

One might recall here the story of the ten dull-witted people who crossed a river. Did they all reach the other side safely? In their confusion, they began to doubt: “Is he not here?” Each one of the group, counting the others and excluding himself, found only nine. “Did the tenth drown in the river? Has one among us perished?”—they began to cry in despair.

A passerby, hearing their lament, was amused. He approached and said to one of them, “Hey, my friend, *you* are the tenth!” With these simple words, the confusion vanished. “I am the tenth!”—this knowledge arose in the listener instantly, directly, and without any further need for inquiry or verification.

This well-known parable has long served as an illustration of the immediacy of *aparokṣa jñāna* (direct knowledge). Śaṅkarācārya himself invokes this analogy to explain how direct Self-knowledge arises from the *mahāvākya* (great Vedic statement):

sadevetivadīkhyebhyaḥ pramā sphuṭatarā bhavet |daśamo'sītyasmād yathā, evam pratyagātmani || (*Gītā Bhāṣya, Upadeśa Sāhasrī Prose 18.184*)

"Just as from the statement 'You are the tenth,' the knowledge 'I am the tenth' arises vividly and unmistakably, so too, from declarations such as 'That Thou Art,' clear and direct Self-knowledge arises."

In the same way that the tenth man realized his own overlooked presence, the qualified seeker—upon hearing the *mahāvākya*—realizes: *I am Brahman, non-dual, ever-pure, ever-luminous; the seeming reality of worldly transactions (vyavahāra) has no truth in Me.* This insight is not a construction of the intellect, nor a distant conclusion reached through reasoning, nor an object to be obtained through practice. It is a revelation of one's own nature.

With this understanding firmly established, no further "experience" is necessary. Nothing remains to be confirmed. Just as the tenth man had no need for a vision, miracle, or further verification after hearing the truth, so too the seeker, having heard and understood the *mahāvākya*, stands in the direct knowledge of the Self

19. How to teach the ultimate truth, and how to grasp it

(17-8-53)

The Transformative Power of Right Knowledge:

When it is said that complete and liberating knowledge arises merely from hearing the statements of the *śruti* (scripture), some may find it surprising—even implausible. But when examined closely, what truly distinguishes *samyagjñāna* (right knowledge) from *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge)? Both are forms of cognition, and both declare the nature of an object—*"it is like this."* Yet false knowledge deceives because it masquerades as true while it lasts. The mark of *samyagjñāna* is that, upon its arising, it exposes the error in the former cognition and causes the illusion to fall away. Hence, the sages who know the truth boldly declare, "Everything you have understood is wrong."

Such a sweeping declaration is not made to those who are wholly ignorant—for them, instruction proceeds gradually. To them it is said, "This part is correct, but this particular assumption must be revised." But to the mature seeker, whose intellect is refined and ready for truth, the *śruti* may declare the full force of negation: *"neti neti — not this, not this."*

Just as a photograph becomes sharper the closer the lens is to its subject, right knowledge clarifies by directing our attention toward the essential, not the peripheral. And when this knowledge dawns, it answers not only the question of *what* is real, but also *why* the illusion was ever believed.

A simple anecdote may illustrate this. In the Anandāśrama edition of the Taittirīya Bhāṣya, the text was printed in such a way that the phrase *buddhyupādhi-lakṣaṇāyāḥ* ended a line, and the following line began with *kṣurādirdvāraiḥ...*—a strange sequence, which led a reader to wonder what razors (*kṣura*) had to do with cognition! His confusion persisted until someone nearby suggested, "Try reading it as *cakṣurādirdvāraiḥ*—'through the doors of the eyes and other senses'." Instantly, the sentence became intelligible. The correct reading dispelled the prior confusion in a flash. Such is the effect of *samyagjñāna*—it reveals what was always true, by simply removing the veil of misunderstanding.

This is the power of the *śruti*, which—being omniscient—corrects our vision rather than our vocabulary. The *Veda-Puruṣa* does not blame us for our ignorance. Our tendency to look outward is natural, for the senses are designed to lead us outward. As the Upaniṣad says, *"parāñci khāni vyatṛṇat svayambhūḥ—He, the self-existent, directed the senses outward."* Therefore, our knowledge remains confined to external things, and we miss the inner Self, which alone is the truth.

The Turn Inward: A Shift in Vision:

But then, a new vision is taught:
"kaścid dhīraḥ pratyagātmānam aikṣata āvṛtta-cakṣur amṛtatvam icchan"—
"A wise one, desiring immortality, turns his gaze inward and beholds the innermost Self."

With this teaching, a profound inner reasoning is sparked: *"I have always looked outward. I have sought permanence in what is impermanent. But if I truly desire the deathless, must I not reverse this vision and look inward?"* And with that solitary suggestion, the aspirant's orientation changes entirely. The direction of their inquiry shifts—from the objects of knowledge to the ground of all knowing.

For the advanced seeker, even such verbal instruction may be unnecessary. The mere presence of a realized being is enough to ignite the flame of insight. The *śruti* recounts how the doubts of Sanaka and the other sages were resolved not through verbal discourse, but by the silent presence of Dakṣiṇāmūrti. Absorbed in the contemplation of the Self, the very silence of that supreme teacher became instruction. His stillness was eloquence; his inner absorption became a mirror in which the sages saw their own Self.

This too has parallels in the worldly arts. In practices like *mohana* (enchantment) and *vaśīkaraṇa* (hypnotic suggestion), the expert may cause others to experience images and sensations without any external basis—purely through the force of suggestion. But in the case of Self-realization, the suggestion is not of a non-existent object; it is a gentle nudge to recognize what has always been present but unobserved. The Self is not fabricated—it is revealed.

Turning Inward Through Āgama: The Shift from Object to Self"

The *śruti* and the *guru*—the revealed word and the teacher—perform a singular, transformative function: they reverse our *parāṅmukhatva*, the outward-facing tendency of the senses. This external orientation, so natural and automatic, is the primary obstacle to recognizing the Self—the innermost Reality that is already our own. The *śruti* does not create some new awareness of a previously non-existent truth. Rather, by gently guiding the gaze inward, it allows us to abide in the ever-present *ātman*, the self-revealing truth of all beings.

This reorientation, this turning inward, is called *pratyag-dṛṣṭi*. To bring it about, the *śruti* employs a specific mode of instruction known as *āgama*—the authoritative teaching handed down by those who have themselves realized the truth. Without such instruction, the *ātman*, though ever-present, remains hidden, inaccessible through perception, inference, or other empirical means. The *āgama* alone redirects our vision toward the truth.

Let us consider an example of such *āgama*. The *Kenopaniṣad* opens with a profound inquiry posed by the disciple:
"kena iṣitaṁ patati preṣitaṁ manaḥ..."—
"By whom is the mind directed? At whose command does the body, along with the senses, function?"
In response, the teacher does not offer a metaphysical abstraction, nor does he point to some observable phenomenon. Instead, he offers a revelatory teaching:
"It is the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, the Speech of speech, the Life of life, the Eye of the eye. By separating oneself from all these, one attains immortality."

Here, the teaching points beyond the faculties of knowledge—beyond seeing, speaking, or even thinking. None of these can grasp the Self, for the Self is not an object. And yet, though *anupalabdha* (inaccessible to ordinary means), the Self is not unknowable. To resolve the seeker's doubt, the *Upaniṣad* declares:

> *"anyad eva tad viditād atho aviditād adhi | iti śuśruma dhīrāṇāṁ ye nas tad vicacakṣire ||"*
> "That (Self) is surely other than the known; and indeed, it is beyond the unknown. Thus have we heard from the wise who have taught us."

This is *āgama*—not the transmission of a logical proposition, but the unveiling of a truth which, though not grasped by perception or inference, can nevertheless be known through the living word of the *śruti*.

The Known, the Unknown, and That Which Transcends Both:

To fully appreciate the intent of this teaching, we must grasp what is meant by *vidita* (the known) and *avidita* (the unknown).

The term *vidita* includes all that is accessible to knowledge—everything that is, in some way, an object of experience. This includes not only the external world we perceive with our senses—land, rivers, mountains, stars—but also the internal world: the body, the senses, the *prāṇa*, the mind, intellect, and ego. All of these are part of what the *śāstra* classifies as the *adhyātmika* (spiritual), *ādhibhautika* (physical), and *ādhidaivika* (divine) dimensions of experience. In short, *vidita* encompasses the entire realm of objectivity—whatever is nameable, describable, or imaginable.

But what of that which is not yet manifest? The *avyākṛta*—the undifferentiated cause of all that later appears as name and form—is *avidita*, the unknown. Like a seed hidden beneath the soil, it is not directly accessible, yet it is presumed by reason, just as we infer the presence of a seed from the sprouting of a tree. This unmanifest, causal state too is within the domain of objective knowledge.

The *Paramātman*, the supreme Self, is neither of these. It is not a known object (*vidita*), for it is never seen. Nor is it simply the unknown (*avidita*), for it is not an absence, nor a latent

cause awaiting manifestation. It transcends both known and unknown. It is not the content of knowledge but the light by which knowledge occurs. It is the Witness of both the known and the unknown, and of the knowing itself. Thus, the Upaniṣadic sages rightly declare: “It is different from the known, and beyond the unknown.” This is the core of *āgama*, the transmission of a wisdom not constructed by the intellect, but recognized through its quiet cessation.

The Readiness of the Disciple and the Depth of Perspective:

Setting aside the previous discussion, the central import of the *āgama* statement—“different from the known, and also beyond the unknown”—is that this *tattva* (Reality) must be *discovered*, not merely debated. But this discovery depends not only on the clarity of the teaching, but equally on the preparedness of the seeker. However profound and precise the teacher may be, unless the disciple possesses the necessary qualifications (*adhikāritva*), the instruction will not bear fruit.

Indeed, there is always the risk that those unprepared in perspective may misconstrue the teaching. Hearing “different from the *vidita* (known) and different from the *avidita* (unknown),” the untrained intellect might imagine that this implies a third object—another item in a conceptual catalog. But Vedāntic insight is not about adding another object to the mind’s collection; it is about transcending the entire framework of objectification. For this shift to occur, the disciple must be as *ready in inward vision* as the teacher is *established in truth*.

To illustrate this: when a master violinist shows a student where to place the fingers on the strings and how to draw the bow, it is of no use if the disciple lacks the subtle sensibility to recognize the placement. The master may demonstrate perfectly, but the sound will not arise unless the disciple’s ear and hand are refined. In the same way, the words *vidita* and *avidita*, which encompass the spiritual (*ādhyātmika*), physical (*ādhibhautika*), and divine (*ādhidaivika*) domains, require a holistic grasp—one that sees the *totality* as one fabric. Absent this integration, the statement will seem barren of meaning.

The common intellect, bound by dualistic habits, remains perplexed: “If it is not known, it must be unknown. If it is neither, then how can it be anything at all?” Such reasoning, though earnest, remains confined to the realm of opposites, and cannot access that which transcends both. The scriptures describe this as the plight of those who take delight not in the *Dharma Sindhu* (the ocean of dharma), but in the *Anukūla Sindhu*—the shallow pool of personal preferences and agreeable opinions.

For those naturally inclined to look outward, the terms *vidita* and *avidita* will always be filtered through a material lens. Their native intellect resists the inward turn. As a result, both *Sādhana-śāstra* (the practical path) and *Siddhānta-śāstra* (the ultimate doctrine) remain tasteless to them. The truth remains veiled, not because it is hidden, but because the eyes are turned in the wrong direction.

A Parable of Perspective - Seeing Through the Right Lens:

To make this distinction more tangible, consider an example—perhaps drawn from the biography of Swami Dayānanda Saraswati. Please note that it is shared only to highlight the importance of *perspective*, not to diminish the contributions of any teacher.

It is said that in his early years, Dayānanda attempted to examine a corpse floating in the river to verify the location of the six *cakras* mentioned in Yogic literature. Finding no such structures, he concluded that the *śat-cakras* must be figments of imagination. But this conclusion came from a literal, anatomical perspective. He had looked for what was never outwardly there to begin with. The *cakras*, as taught by the Yogis, are subtle—*mānasika-sthānas*, mental or meditative centers of experience. They are not physical objects to be discovered with a scalpel, but experiential nodes known only through interior practice. Thus, Swamiji, in that instance, was using the *eye of skin* (*carma-cakṣus*), rather than the *vision of Yoga-śāstra*.

A similar example is offered from his childhood: On the night of *Śivarātri*, Dayānanda saw a mouse nibbling at grains offered upon the Śivaliṅga. He reasoned, “If this is truly Śiva, why can’t He protect Himself from the mouse?” and concluded that idol worship must be false. But again, the mistake was one of perspective. Those who perform *liṅgārcana* do not worship the stone itself, but the presence of the *Iśvara* (*sarvavyāpi Śiva*) reflected through it. For them, Śiva is in the *liṅga*, in the grains, in the mouse—and everywhere. The mouse nibbling the offering does not diminish Śiva’s divinity any more than clouds obscure the brilliance of the sun. Therefore, it is not wrong to worship him in movable and immovable lingas. They believe that no harm can come to the Ishvaratva (divinity) o Ishvara) merely because the rat ate the rice grains.

[Thus, to dismiss idol worship based on external appearances is to miss the inner logic of *dṛṣṭi-bheda*—the difference in vision. The *śāstra*-driven vision sees unity pervading multiplicity, divinity in all forms. But the materially-oriented mind, looking outward, sees only contradiction and limitation.

This is why *adhikāra*—the readiness of the seeker—is so vital. Without the inner refinement of vision, even the most luminous teachings will appear mundane. But to one whose intellect has been turned inward through the blessings of the *guru* and the grace of the *śruti*, even a few words can unlock boundless truth.]

Realizing the Paramātman: Transcending the Known and the Unknown:

In the same manner, one must receive the teaching that the *paramātman*—the Supreme Self—is distinct from both the *vidita* (known) and the *avidita* (unknown). But this must not be misunderstood as a statement positing three separate entities: the known, the unknown, and some third principle beyond them. Rather, all that is other than the Self is classified under two comprehensive categories—*vidita* and *avidita*. Once these are distinguished, the *śruti* declares that the *paramātman* is other than both—not to introduce a third thing, but to guide the seeker to discern that these two themselves are not the ultimate truth.

To the qualified listener (*śrotṛ*), as soon as this instruction is heard, a sudden recognition dawns: “That which illumines the entire field of experience, that ever-present witness-consciousness (*sākṣicaitanya*) which shines even in the awareness of the *vidita* and the *avidita*—that is none other than my very own Self, the *paramātmavastu*.” What had been so far considered indirect (*parokṣa*)—distant and conceptual—now becomes immediate, self-evident, and intimate. The veil lifts.

From the standpoint of this inner Self, there is no scope for *anātman*—the non-self in the form of the known and the unknown—to remain as a second reality. For the existence of

ātma-caitanya is not derived or dependent—it is Being itself. Everything that appears, whether as time, space, name, form, or world (*vyākṛta-prapañca*), arises only in the light of this Self. When this whole manifest universe merges into the unmanifest (*avyākṛta-rūpa*), even time and space lose their footing, revealing the substratum of consciousness.

Its existence is like foam upon water, or a face seen in a mirror, or a snake projected on a rope. The foam has no being apart from the water; the reflection no existence apart from the face; the snake, no substance apart from the rope. In the same way, the universe—divided into *vidita* and *avidita*—never had an independent being apart from the Self. Just as when the rope is recognized, it becomes evident that the snake was never truly there, so too, when the *ātmavastu* is realized, it becomes clear that the non-self was never separate from it.

The Seeker's Preparation and the Inner Realization:

Therefore, the disciple who is qualified—one whose heart is matured through discipline—must first turn inward and discover the Self within, guided by a teacher who is rooted in the *āgama*, the authoritative tradition. As the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* declares:

> "*Tasmād evaṃ vijñāno dānta uparataḥ titikṣuḥ samāhitaḥ bhūtvā' tmany evātmānaṃ paśyati, sarvam ātmānaṃ paśyati*"
> (Bṛh. Upa. 4.4.23)

"Thus, one who has become calm, restrained, patient, and collected—knowing in this way—sees the Self within the Self; and he sees everything as the Self."

Having calmed the mind through discipline and discernment, the qualified seeker must first realize the *paramātman*—the Supreme Self—as his own innermost being. This direct realization, that the Self within is none other than the universal, all-pervading reality, brings with it a profound shift in vision: the realization that *I am all*, and that *there is nothing apart from me*. The experience of separation dissolves; unity alone remains.

This does not mean that the world is negated or denied—only that its apparent plurality no longer veils the substratum. The seeker sees that the diversity of names and forms rests upon the indivisible essence of the Self.

To illustrate this, the Upaniṣadic sages give a simple analogy: when one says, "This is the king's chamber," it does not imply that the rest of the palace is not his. It simply highlights where the king may be immediately encountered. So too, though the *paramātman* is all-pervading, he must first be discovered within. That inward discovery is the key to recognizing him everywhere.

In the same way, Śrī Rāma—though ruler of the entire earth—is praised as the Lord of Ayodhyā, his capital, not to limit his dominion, but to signify the immediacy of his presence there. Likewise, though the *paramātman* pervades all existence, the place where he is to be first found, realized, and known directly is within one's own Self. This is the intention of the Vedas, which, before stating that everything is the *Paramātman* (supreme self), say, *aham Brahmāsmi*—"I am Brahman," and so on.

From Duality to Non-Dual Vision: Advaita's Transformative Shift:

The difference between the ordinary, worldly vision and the vision born of the scriptures (*śāstra-dṛṣṭi*) is beautifully illustrated through the contrast between Hiraṇyakaśipu and Prahlāda. In Hiraṇyakaśipu's eyes, Viṣṇu was merely a powerful being—an enemy of the demons—one to be sought out and destroyed. His perception was shaped entirely by a fragmented, oppositional worldview.

But Prahlāda's understanding was rooted in *paramārtha-dṛṣṭi*, the vision of the highest truth. For him, Viṣṇu was not just a deity among others, but the *paramātman*—the all-pervading Self, the very essence of all beings. He saw no enemy, no otherness. Even Hiraṇyakaśipu himself, though set against Viṣṇu, could not exist apart from Viṣṇu. To Prahlāda, Viṣṇu was the *Self* of all: demons and demigods, humans, animals, birds—none were apart from Him. In this vision, there are no enemies, no friends, no neutrals—there is only the One, appearing in countless forms.

This is the vision of Advaita: not merely a doctrine or conceptual stance, but a complete transformation of perspective.

Importantly, *Advaita-dṛṣṭi*—the non-dual vision—is not to be confused with just another way of seeing, opposed to duality. If one sees Advaita merely as an alternative to duality, it becomes a conceptual symbol—just another mental construction. In its true sense, *Advaita* is not a counter-vision; it is the dissolution of all opposed visions. The scriptures do not offer a rival outlook; rather, they expand and purify our perception, dissolving division and immersing the mind in unity.

The ultimate declaration of *śruti* is this: apart from the *paramātman*, there is no valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), no object of knowledge (*prameya*), and no knower (*pramātṛ*). All three—knower, known, and knowing—are sublated in the light of the one Self.

If this truth were to be expressed in a single traditional statement, it would be this well-known maxim:

"Adhyāropāpavādābhyāṁ niṣprapañcaṁ prapañcate"
"Through superimposition and negation, the non-dual reality is revealed by making use of the world of appearance."

This is the essence of the *śāstric* method. The *paramārtha-tattva*—the ultimate reality—is *niṣprapañca*, free from multiplicity. There is no division, no spread-out world, no *prapañca* in it. The very word *prapañca* derives from the root *paci* meaning "to spread out"—referring to the fragmented appearance of a world divided by name, form, and function.

In the highest vision, *prapañca* is never real. But the scriptures, beginning from the common assumption that the world is real, initially adopt its distinctions: *pramātṛ* (knower), *pramāṇa* (means), and *prameya* (object). Using this framework as an upāya—a provisional method—they guide the seeker toward the *ātman*, the foundational reality underlying all appearances.

Then, through the method of negation (*apavāda-nyāya*), each of these distinctions is resolved into the One. The final realization is not that the *ātman* exists *alongside* the world, but that the entire world is nothing but the *ātman*. What appears as many, when properly understood, is seen to be the one indivisible Self.

START

20. Some Methods of Teaching Vedanta

(18-8-53)

The Perspective of Śruti and the Revelation of Non-Duality:

In the vision of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, the authority of the *śruti*—the revealed scripture—rests not upon dogma or blind faith, but upon its conformity to universal experience (*anubhava*). Vedānta is not a contrived system built to avoid contradiction; it is a path of inner recognition. It is a means for realizing what *is*, exactly as it *is*, without embellishment or distortion. It is not merely thought or belief—it is vision (*darśana*).

Vedānta stands upon the foundation of *āgama*—scriptural instruction—which alone can reveal that which lies beyond the reach of perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). But not every teacher is qualified to speak of this hidden reality. Only one who has *seen* (*dṛṣṭa*) the *tattva*—who has known Brahman directly—can teach it truthfully and effectively. The *śruti* declares: **"***ananya-prokta gatir-atra nāsti***"***—unless spoken by one who is established in the truth, there is no way for it to be truly understood.*

The teaching is not mechanical. The disciple must possess the inner readiness (*adhikāritva*) to receive it. Once, a teacher explained the core teachings of Śaṅkarabhagavatpāda's Advaita Vedānta, adding: "Some disciples consider the Ācārya to be none other than an incarnation of Śiva himself. And there is no need for further proof. Brahman is infinite. The finite cannot comprehend the infinite. Only Brahman knows Brahman. And since the Ācārya has revealed Brahman in a way that aligns with experience, what doubt remains that he is Brahman, or Śiva?"

This is not blind glorification; it is affirmed by the *śruti* itself: **"***brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati***"***—one who knows Brahman becomes Brahman.* The implication is profound: our alienation from Brahman is born only of ignorance (*avidyā*); and through *brahmajñāna*, that ignorance is dispelled. Thus, the guru teaches in the language of the *śāstra*, and the disciple, properly prepared, understands in the same light. This mutual clarity is the essence of Vedānta.

Every dialogue between guru and disciple in the Upaniṣads reflects this dynamic: the disciple raises doubt; the guru instructs with luminous insight; the disciple gains realization. The conclusion is always: **"***tat ha asya vijajñau***"***—he understood it.*

Teaching Through Perspective: From Division to Unity:

The *śruti*, then, shifts our orientation. It does not merely present logical arguments; it reorients vision itself. The teaching is designed to unfold in the same sequence as our experience—beginning with illusion, but ending in clarity. One such method is this: when seeking to understand the truth of reality, one must not start with isolated individuals; one must consider the whole, the aggregate.

The defining mark of Advaita is the *negation of duality*. Unless one understands this, there is the risk of mistaking Advaita as merely another form of dualism—another separate path, another metaphysical stance. But just as illusion (*adhyāsa*) is resolved by the recognition

of its substratum, Advaita is the unveiling of the unity that was always present. The one moon in the sky may appear as two due to an optical illusion, but the removal of that illusion does not *create* unity—it reveals it.

Duality is a projection; non-duality is reality. This is not to be speculated about; it is to be *seen—experienced*—inwardly. When seeking to understand the truth of experience, the *subject* is that which always grasps the whole; the *object* is that which is grasped. On examination, they are found to be non-different. The elements—earth, water, fire, air—are all perceptible; but their origin is subtle space (*ākāśa*), which itself is not an object of touch or perception. Recognizing the elemental world, understanding its qualities, and intuiting the indivisibility beneath all distinctions—this is the experience of Advaita.

The Disappearance of Division:

The appearance of separation is like the reflection of the sun in water. So long as the water appears separate, the reflected sun seems distinct. But when the illusion is removed, the sun is known as one. Likewise, the Self—shining in the buddhi as the illuminator of all experiences—remains ever one. Just as all light in the world is traceable to the one sun, so too all consciousness is rooted in the single, undivided *cit*—the Self.

Without this insight, the truth cannot be determined. The very nature of the world is none other than the nature of the supreme Self (*paramātman*). And to know this—not merely as doctrine, but as one's own truth—is Advaita

Causality and the Philosophical Approaches to the Origin of the World

In any production or transformation, two kinds of causes are to be considered: the *upādānakāraṇa* (material cause) and the *nimittakāraṇa* (efficient cause). The material cause is that without which the action cannot take place—for example, one cannot make a pot out of cotton; only clay can serve as its essential material. Therefore, clay is said to be the material cause of the pot. The efficient cause is that by whose agency the transformation is brought about—the potter, the wheel, and other implements. Both types of causes are required: the presence of the substance to be transformed, and the operation of instruments and effort to effect that transformation. This classical framework underlies much of ancient Indian thought on causality.

Now, what is the material and efficient cause of the world? On this question, philosophical schools have offered various theories, each attempting to account for creation through reasoning and observation.

The Sāṅkhya View: Pradhāna as Material Cause

According to the Sāṅkhyas, when the three *guṇas—sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—are in perfect equilibrium, the primal, undifferentiated matter called *pradhāna* exists. From this *pradhāna*, evolution proceeds: first arises *mahat* (cosmic intelligence), then *ahaṅkāra* (ego), then the subtle elements (*tanmātras*), and from them, the gross elements. The *puruṣa*, the conscious self, is passive and not the cause of the world. This is the classical Sāṅkhya doctrine.

Though the Sāṅkhya school is largely extinct today, its influence has deeply permeated Indian philosophical thought. Many lawgivers and sages accepted the Sāṅkhya division of *guṇas* and developed treatises on *dharma* accordingly. Even the *Bhagavad Gītā*, while

rooted in the Upaniṣads, incorporates many elements of Sāṅkhya thought. Vedāntins, though differing in metaphysical conclusions, often accept the functional framework of the *guṇas*, provided it aligns with experiential truth.

But what is the epistemological basis of the Sāṅkhya theory of causality? Their foundational claim is that *pradhāna*—being composed of the three *guṇas*—must be the material cause of the world, since pleasure, pain, and delusion (the effects of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*) pervade worldly experience. This is known as *pariṇāmavāda*—the theory of real transformation. It draws partial support from natural observations: geologists see the transformation of earth materials; botanists observe the emergence of plant life from the soil; zoologists explain the generation of insects within vegetation. Though the exact process remains uncertain, transformation in nature is evident.

The Vaiśeṣika View: Atomism and Ārambhavāda:

The Vaiśeṣikas present a different causal account. According to them, composite objects are formed by the aggregation of their parts—cloth from threads, for instance. The world, being a composite, must be formed from indivisible parts—atoms (*aṇu*). These atoms combine to form dyads, triads, and ultimately the perceptible world. This view is called *ārambhavāda*—the doctrine of atomic aggregation.

Modern atomic theory, though more sophisticated, lends partial empirical support to this approach: various substances arise from combinations of fundamental particles. Although contemporary physics has gone further by reducing matter to energy, the basic insight that complex forms emerge from simpler units affirms the plausibility of *ārambhavāda*.

The Limitation of Logic in Determining the Self:

In both schools—the Sāṅkhyas and the Vaiśeṣikas—we see a common reliance on logic (*tarka*) and inference to construct their theories. Every valid inference (*anumāna*) depends on invariable concomitance (*vyāpti*) drawn from experience. For example: “Wherever there is smoke, there is fire,” is a sound inference because we never see smoke without fire. Such reasoning holds only when supported by universal experience.

However, when we turn to the question of the *ātman*—the Self—these approaches falter. The *ātman* is not an object available to any external *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge). It is never perceived, inferred, or touched by empirical means. Still, thinkers from these traditions, Sāṅkhyas and the Vaiśeṣikas, have attempted to determine the *ātman*’s role in causality through logic, which is ultimately inadequate in this domain.

[The key point is this: while reasoning may offer models of how the world comes to be, such logic is always dependent on experience. When applied to the *ātman*, which transcends objecthood and empirical experience, that logic fails. Thus, we must be careful not to apply worldly causality to the domain of the Self. The Vedāntic method approaches this inquiry from a different standpoint—one that we shall soon explore.]

Refuting the Extremes of Cause-and-Effect Theories: A Vedāntic Standpoint

We indeed observe examples of transformation (*pariṇāma*) and origination (*ārambha*) in the world—milk becoming yogurt, water becoming ice. We also now know, through the experimental science of modern times, that matter is constituted of atomic structures. I have already mentioned these. But what of it? Can these observations definitively

establish that the world has evolved from *prakṛti*, or that it is fundamentally composed of discrete parts?

A humorous anecdote illustrates the fallacy of drawing grand conclusions from limited experience. It is said that a boy from Bombay, visiting a village, once asked the milkman each morning: “Why are you raising this cow? In Bombay, our milkman brings milk from a pot!” Having only seen milk poured from a vessel, the boy had never encountered the source—a cow—and therefore assumed the pot itself to be the source of milk. While the arguments of logicians may not be quite so absurd, there is little doubt that similar errors arise when conclusions are drawn from a narrow empirical base. In this light, neither the *pariṇāmavāda* of the Sāṅkhyas nor the *ārambhavāda* of the Vaiśeṣikas can be taken as revealing the ultimate nature of causality. Śaṅkarācārya has clearly shown this through refined logic grounded in experience. The brilliance of thinkers who rely solely on logical dialectic can be seen in works like Śrīharṣa’s *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādya*, which exposes the limits of mere reasoning.

The Sāṅkhyas and Vaiśeṣikas differ fundamentally on the nature of the causal relation. According to the Sāṅkhyas, non-existent things (*asat*) cannot come into being. Therefore, the effect must already exist in a subtle form within the cause—it only manifests through transformation. This doctrine is called *satkāryavāda*—the theory that the effect pre-exists in the cause.

The Vaiśeṣikas, on the other hand, uphold the opposite view. If an effect already exists, they argue, there is no meaning to saying that it is “born.” Birth implies novelty, that something that was not there has now come into being. Hence, they maintain that the effect is altogether *non-existent* prior to its origination. This is the *asatkāryavāda*—the theory that the effect does not pre-exist in the cause.

Their example is as follows: when two atoms combine, a *dyad* (*dvyaṇuka*) is formed. This dyad did not exist before. After its origination, it acquires the relation of inherence (*samavāya*) with its constituent atoms. Just as one only becomes a minister *after* winning an election, so too the effect “comes into existence” only after being produced.

Now, if we evaluate both views purely by logical analysis, we find that each contains a partial truth, and each must yield some ground. To say something is “born” is to acknowledge that some new event or transformation takes place. Even the Sāṅkhyas, who maintain that the effect is not absolutely new, must admit that a new form has emerged. To that extent, their *satkāryavāda* must accommodate a partial *asatkāryavāda*.

Likewise, the Vaiśeṣikas’ claim that the effect is wholly non-existent before its production leads to difficulty. If non-existence alone were the criterion for birth, then why insist that a pot must be made from clay? Why not from cotton or yarn, since all were equally “non-existent” as pots before? Clearly, something special in the clay makes it suitable to become a pot. That special fitness must exist in the cause—this is exactly what the Sāṅkhyas were saying.

Hence, even the Vaiśeṣikas, for all their insistence on absolute novelty, are compelled to admit that some quality of the effect must inhere in the cause. In this regard, they too align with the Sāṅkhyas’ *satkāryavāda*.

Śrī Gauḍapāda Ācārya, anticipating these debates, distilled the Vedāntic position with remarkable clarity. As Śaṅkarācārya later explains: the Vaiśeṣikas claim that “what is” cannot be born, while the Sāṅkhyas argue that “what is not” cannot be born. Trapped in mutual contradiction, each refutes the other. The Vedāntic teaching proceeds along a different path altogether—a path that must now be explained

Establishing the Doctrine of Non-Origination (*Ajātivāda*)

The objections raised earlier—whether the effect pre-exists in the cause or not—ultimately have no satisfactory resolution. If what already exists cannot be born, and what does not exist also cannot be born, then both positions are logically untenable. Thus, the *Ajātivāda* of the Vedāntins—the doctrine that there is no real origination at all—stands established. The non-dual, ever-existent Self alone is the ultimate reality. The world, in truth, never arises from anything at all. This is the bold and uncompromising vision of Vedānta: *ajātivāda* is not an abstract philosophical speculation—it is the conclusion reached through unflinching inquiry and experience-rooted reasoning, as taught by the *Ācārya*.

Yet a doubt may naturally arise. If the non-dual Brahman or Self alone is real, how can the Vedāntic method of teaching remain valid? Do not the Vedāntins also rely on distinctions—individual and collective, gross and subtle, *ādhyātmika*, *ādhibhautika*, and *ādhidaivika*, cause and effect, and so on? If they too make use of these dualistic constructs in teaching, then are they not equally open to criticism? Can they, in good faith, critique other schools for employing dualistic frameworks?

This objection, however, stems from a misunderstanding of the Advaitic method. The Advaitin does not posit these distinctions as ultimately real. Rather, he acknowledges that human understanding is initially steeped in duality. The mind grasps through contrast, through differentiation. Knowing this, the teacher uses conventional distinctions merely as *upāya*—a provisional means—to guide the student. Through these superimposed notions, other erroneous notions are gradually removed. And finally, even the provisional ones are withdrawn.

This is the hallmark of the *adhyāropa-apavāda* method unique to Advaita: first superimposition (*adhyāropa*), then negation (*apavāda*). Once the seeker has been led beyond duality, even the scaffolding of method is seen to be unnecessary. What remains is non-dual reality alone, free from all distinctions.

To make this clearer, consider how Vedāntins approach the widely held cause-and-effect theory. The Upaniṣads themselves declare that the universe originates from Brahman: from Brahman arose *ākāśa* (space); from *ākāśa*, *vāyu* (air); from *vāyu*, *agni* (fire); from *agni*, *ap* (water); and from *ap*, *pṛthivī* (earth). Hence, Vedāntins assert that Brahman—not inert *pradhāna*, nor atoms—is the true cause of the universe. In so doing, they refute theories that posit non-conscious entities as the source of the world. But this explanation is itself only provisional.

Those who remember the teaching of Śrī Gauḍapāda will recognize that this stepwise instruction is not the ultimate truth. For Vedāntins, *ajāti*—non-origination—is foundational. Brahman is unborn, changeless, indivisible. The world only appears due to ignorance; it is not an actual transformation of Brahman.

Why, then, do the Upaniṣads speak of creation at all? Only to assist the seeker (*mumukṣu*) who still believes in the world's independent reality. It is a compassionate concession. The

purpose is not to confirm the reality of causation, but to gradually dissolve the mistaken conviction in it. As the *Ācāryas* explain while commenting on one of Gauḍapāda's *kārikās*:

> "*Asti vastu bhāvaḥ*—for those who assert the reality of objects, who hold fast to dualistic notions, and whose discrimination is not yet mature, the teaching of creation from Brahman is offered as a means. Let them hold to it provisionally. But for those seasoned in Vedānta, the realization of the unborn, non-dual Self (*ajādvayātma*) will arise naturally—not as an ultimate proposition, but as the truth itself."

[This is the deeper genius of the Vedāntic method. Unlike other schools that try to prove their theories to be true in an absolute sense, Advaita acknowledges the need for a pedagogical process. The teacher meets the student where he is, guiding him through layers of mistaken identity and mistaken understanding—until all constructs are transcended, and the luminous Self alone shines, ever as it is, without a second.]

The Intent of Vedantic Teaching: Beyond Cause and Effect

The essential question to consider here is whether the conviction that the non-dual Self (*ātman*) is the sole and ultimate reality arises directly from the *śruti*'s (scripture's) instruction—or whether it implies that the birth of the universe is itself the supreme truth. The answer, according to Vedānta, is subtle and vital.

When Vedantins say that Brahman is the cause of the universe, they are not reifying causality as the final reality. Unlike the *Sāṃkhyas*, who hold the effect as a real transformation of the cause (*satkāryavāda*), Vedantins do not accept that Brahman has truly become the world. The world is not a separate or secondary existence that has emerged from Brahman. There is no effect independent of the cause. The cause-effect framework is employed only provisionally to loosen the grip of empirical thinking and lead the seeker toward direct recognition of the non-dual Brahman.

This is beautifully hinted at in the humorous exchange where an ācārya, upon meeting a man named Nārāyaṇa, remarked, "Seeing you is like seeing Nārāyaṇa!" The gentleman cleverly responded, "But surely, ācārya, you have heard the *śruti* say that matter alone is real!" While humorous, the remark highlights the Upaniṣadic teaching: "The effect is merely a name, a verbal designation—the truth is the material cause, which alone is real." Just as knowing clay reveals all its modifications—pot, jar, and so on—knowing Brahman reveals all, because the "all" is not other than That.

Some modern Vedantins have labeled this position *vivartavāda*—the theory of apparent transformation. Others say Brahman is the illusory cause (*vivartopādāna*) of the universe. But setting aside the terminology and debates, the essential conclusion remains: Brahman alone is real. The manifold world, with all its forms, appears to the ignorant as real, but Brahman has not truly transformed into it.

Śaṅkarācārya's rejection of alternative theories was not driven by sectarianism, nor by a mere desire to uphold a doctrine. His concern was to expose the internal contradictions and untenability of positing real transformation (*pariṇāma*) or real origination (*ārambha*). All such theories hinge on arbitrarily deciding whether the effect exists before it arises, or not. But in truth, nothing can be said to be born from existence, non-existence, both, or neither.

It is like planting seeds in barren land: regardless of what one says about the soil, no harvest follows. Similarly, those who cling to theories of causation while turning away from the immediate experience of the Self (*ātman*) will find themselves stranded. From the standpoint of the Witness (*sākṣī*), the triad of knower (*pramātṛ*), means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and known (*prameya*) never stands apart. They are like foam on the water—not wholly different from water, nor fully identical, but merely appearing.

So when the *śruti* says, “From Brahman, space arose,” how are we to understand it? We must grasp that space, time, and the entire cascade of creation are appearances *in* Brahman—not real emanations from it. That same *Upaniṣad* which later describes the “birth” of space from Brahman first establishes Brahman as truth, knowledge, and infinitude—and instructs that it must be realized in the heart. If the intention were to teach literal origination, the text would have opened with that. Just as in the sentence, “Even if you pay me ten thousand rupees per step, I will not come to his house,” the essence lies in “I will not come,” so too, in Vedantic passages, the emphasis lies not on the mechanics of creation, but on the unchanging nature of Brahman.

Brahman is the ground of time and space. It is not that Brahman “gives rise” to space as a cause gives rise to an effect. Rather, space is a dependent appearance *within* Brahman. The guiding rule in interpreting such *śruti*-statements is that they must conform to both context (*prakaraṇa*) and experience (*anubhava*). That alone can be considered the true meaning of the scriptures. It is in this light that Śrī Gauḍapāda declares that only one who has gained *ātmajñāna* (Self-knowledge) is truly qualified to interpret the *śruti*.

As one monk lamented: “In our times, Vedantins and monks dwell in every household, but many have not even dreamed of serving a true guru. The statement ‘Knowledge arises only from a true guru’—Kali Yuga ensures it never reaches their ears!” This, alas, has become our reality. Without guidance from realized teachers, misinterpretations proliferate, and the profound wisdom of Vedānta is lost in clever wordplay.

Therefore, seekers should keep the central thrust of these teachings firmly in mind. The distinctions that appear in the course of instruction are not intended as absolute realities by the *śruti*. They are part of a gradual preparation. Their function is solely to direct our gaze inward, toward truth. As Gauḍapāda puts it:

> "*Upāyaḥ so'vatārāya, nāsti bhedaḥ kathaṃcana*" — “Means are for descent (guidance); but in truth, there is not the slightest duality.” (Kārikā 3.15)

This, then, is how the doctrine of causality should be understood within the Vedantic tradition: as a ladder that is ultimately to be discarded once the vision of non-dual reality has dawned.

This is the essence of Gaudapada's statement. In particular, we should understand the process of cause and effect in this way. I have explained this to a small extent today, and I will revisit this idea.

21. The Meaning of the World is Illusory

(19-8-1953)

Human beings naturally operate with certain ingrained perspectives. These are well-suited to navigating the practical world but fall short when it comes to discerning the nature of ultimate reality (*paramārtha-tattva*). For instance, in a census, if the number 23,361 is recorded, we may casually say that about 23,000 people reside in the town, neglecting the remaining digits for convenience. Such approximations suffice in worldly contexts. However, in mathematics—where precision is essential—every digit must be accounted for exactly. Likewise, while our practical feelings and impressions may suffice for day-to-day affairs, they cannot be taken as final in *Vedānta*, the science of the Self. For *Vedānta* is not content with approximation—it seeks the whole truth, grounded in direct, unerring experience (*anubhava*).

This distinction is crucial when considering commonly held views about cause and effect. It is a nearly universal assumption that the cause precedes the effect. Philosophers before Śaṅkara gave this assumption a systematic foundation. The *Sāṅkhyas*, for example, proposed that the effect already exists in an unmanifest form within the cause and that its birth is merely the manifestation of what was already present. In contrast, the *Vaiśeṣikas* held that the effect does not exist at all prior to its birth and only comes into being when it acquires a relation with the cause (*samavāya*).

Modern science, with its own frameworks, offers a parallel view. When hydrogen and oxygen are combined under specific conditions, water is formed. If a Sāṅkhya were to explain this, he would say that water pre-existed in an unmanifest form within the gases and has now become manifest. A Vaiśeṣika would argue that water did not exist at all in the gases and was born anew when they combined.

Which of these aligns better with experience? Each has its appeal. The Sāṅkhyas challenge the Vaiśeṣikas: “That which is non-existent can never be born.” The Vaiśeṣikas reply: “That which already exists does not need to be born.” There is a partial truth in both claims.

Indeed, if hydrogen and oxygen had no inherent potential to become water, how could water arise from their combination? The Sāṅkhyas might rightly argue that such transformation cannot be arbitrary. On the other hand, if water already existed in some full and tangible sense, what meaning could there be in saying that it was born? The Vaiśeṣikas, then, are also not without reason. In practice, we seem to require elements from both views to make sense of things.

However, there is another conclusion that emerges from a deeper inquiry: neither the Sāṅkhya's nor the Vaiśeṣika's view fully accounts for what is. For if that which *is* does not need to be born, and that which *is not* cannot be born, then *nothing is truly born at all*. What we call “birth” or “origination” is, in fact, a transactional appearance—*vyavahāra*—and not a transformation of reality itself. This is the *ajātivāda* (doctrine of non-origination) asserted by the Vedāntins.

One need not accept this conclusion merely because it was taught by Śrī Śaṅkarācārya. The test of any claim in *Vedānta* is whether it stands up to direct and universal experience. Śaṅkara does not deny that in the world we observe apparent cause-and-effect relations. What he clarifies is that both the so-called “cause” and “effect” are themselves appearances—*nāma-rūpa*—superimpositions (*adhyāropa*) upon an unchanging substratum, *Brahman*.

What we call an effect is merely the cause viewed in a different form; and the cause, in turn, is not an entity separate from the effect. All that appears to us, as objects or events, is just a manifestation of *Brahman* under various names and forms. Thus, *Brahman* is called the *upādāna-kāraṇa*—the material cause—not because it transforms into the world, but because the world appears as if it were a transformation of *Brahman*. It is an *as-though* transformation, not a real one.

But then arises a subtle question: If *Brahman* alone is the true cause, and yet everything we conventionally label as “cause” is itself an “effect,” does this not involve a contradiction?

The Illusion of Causal Language and the True Meaning of *Brahman* as Cause

One may raise an objection: “If *Brahman*, as spoken of by the Vedāntins, is the cause of the world, should it not also become an effect? And if there must be a cause for that, and then a cause for that, and so on, would this not lead to an infinite regress (*anavasthā-doṣa*)?”

This objection arises from a misunderstanding—a confusion created by the superficial similarity in the use of the terms “cause” and “effect” in different contexts. The Vedāntins do not employ these terms in the same way the world does. To illustrate this, *Vicāra Sāgara* recounts a humorous story: In one household, the pet dog was named Govinda, and the master’s brother-in-law was named Gopāla. In a neighboring home, the dog was named Gopāla, and the brother-in-law was Govinda. One day, when the dogs of both houses were fighting and barking, the master of the house shouted, “Chase away Gopāla and bring Govinda in!” Hearing this, the mistress of the house—unaware that her husband was referring to the dogs—was aghast, thinking he wanted her to drive out her brother and fetch his own!

So too here: just because the words "cause" and "effect" are used, it does not follow that *Brahman* undergoes change or becomes transformed into the world. The Vedāntic claim that *Brahman* is the cause of the world does not imply that *Brahman* undergoes modification (*pariṇāma*) or becomes something other than itself. It simply means that the world depends upon *Brahman*, just as, in the worldly sense, an effect is supported by and inseparable from its material cause.

In this light, the world is said to be the effect, not because it emerges as a transformed product of *Brahman*, but because it cannot exist independently of it. *Brahman*, the Self of all beings, remains ever the same. The world is nothing but an appearance superimposed upon that immutable reality. Just as the rope is mistaken for a snake, *Brahman* is mistaken for the world. There is no actual transformation—only an illusion of difference.

Furthermore, one must remember that the categories of “before” and “after” apply only where time exists. From the standpoint of Vedānta, time itself is within the world—it too is a projection upon *Brahman*. There is no independent principle of time distinct from *Brahman*, nor is there any space or instrument of action that exists apart from it. The questions of *when*, *where*, and *how* are meaningful only within the domain of transactional reality (*vyavahāra*), which already presumes space, time, and causality.

To seek the origin of the world in terms of “where did it happen?”, “when did it happen?”, or “what caused it?” is to apply limited, empirical reasoning to that which transcends it. We

are habituated to such questions. Once, during a wedding ceremony, a reform-minded guest kept interrupting the priest, asking, “Why is this mantra being chanted?”, “Why is that ritual being done?”, frustrating the ceremony. A weary householder nearby finally retorted, “Why does this *why* arise at all?” There is no “why” for the totality. There is no external space to locate the *where*, nor a higher time to situate the *when*.

In the same way, seeking a cause qualified by space, time, and instrumentality for a world that itself consists of space, time, and instrumental causes is a circular endeavor. It is the projection of empirical thought onto the non-empirical reality.

Therefore, when it is said in the *śruti* that *Brahman* is the cause of the world, the intention is not to present *Brahman* as one link in a causal chain. Rather, it is to indicate that the entire causal order—including time, space, and causality itself—rests upon the substratum of *paramārtha*, the non-dual reality, *Brahman*.

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The Meaning of Brahman as Cause and the Nature of Māyā

Even at this point, one must not imagine that *Brahman* existed *before* the world in time, or that it is located in some *other* place apart from the world. Such thinking still operates within the framework of time and space—which themselves are part of what must be inquired into.

Brahman is none other than the Self (*ātman*)—this is the principal teaching of Vedānta. The world, with its entire apparatus of *pramātṛ* (knower), *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge), and *prameya* (object of knowledge), is but an appearance. In what sense, then, do Vedāntins say that *Brahman* is the cause of the world?

Unlike the *pradhāna* of the Sāṅkhyas, the Self is not a changing substance that undergoes transformation. Unlike the atoms (*paramāṇu*) of the Vaiśeṣikas, the Self is not a composite of inert particles. The Self is indivisible, self-revealing consciousness—it neither transforms nor combines. When Vedāntins say that *Brahman* or the Self is the cause of the world, they mean that the world, consisting of *pramātṛ* and so on, has no existence apart from the Self. It is not an entity *beside* or *outside* the Self—it is nothing other than the Self appearing *as* the world.

As previously established, these categories—knower, means, and object—appear only by the light of the Self, which is the witness (*sākṣī*) of all states. In deep sleep (*suṣupti*), the entire world, including space, time, and causality, disappears. One cannot ask, “Where did the world go?”—for in that very state, there is no *where*, no *when*, and no instrument to raise the question. Yet, the Self persists, unchanging, through waking, dream, and deep sleep. Therefore, what is said is this: in the waking and dream states, the Self *appears as* the world—not that it becomes the world. This is what Vedāntins mean when they say *Brahman* is the cause of the world.

Now, another subtle point must be clarified. It is not that the Self is one entity, and the world is a second, arising alongside it. For that would introduce duality through spatial or temporal juxtaposition. But neither the Self nor the world exists *in* space or *in*

time—because space and time themselves are *known* in awareness; they appear *to* the Self as objects. The subject cannot depend upon the object for its being.

Likewise, since the world is always perceived through the lens of space, time, and causality, it too cannot exist *in* those categories independently. No one has the experience of space being the ground of another space, or of time serving as the foundation for another time. Therefore, the Self cannot be counted as one among many, nor can the world be counted as something second. As the Upaniṣad declares, "*na caikaṃ tadanyat dvitīyaṃ kutaḥ syāt*" — "If there is no one, how can there be a second?" Thus, the Self is beyond number; it is *advitīya*—not merely 'one without a second,' but that which alone is.

Coming to the nature of the world: it is not a thing independent of the Self, nor is it identical to the Self. It follows the Self's existence and appears only in the light of the Self. Hence, it is neither the Self nor something other than the Self. This is what is meant by the classical expression: *tattvānyatābhyām anirvacanīya*—it is "indefinable as either real or unreal." For this reason, Śaṅkarācārya names it *māyā*—mere appearance, illusory in nature.

Consider this illustration: a magician, skilled in *yakṣiṇī-vidyā*, once asked an audience member, "What time is it now?" The man looked at his watch and said, "Six-thirty." The magician replied, "You didn't look properly." When the man looked again, it read seven-thirty. Perplexed, he checked once more—and it was six-thirty again! The magician's illusion had briefly overpowered the appearance. Although the man saw different times, there was in fact no real change in time. Such baseless, inexplicable appearances are what we call *māyā*.

Similarly, the world appears to be real without any justifiable cause or logical necessity. That is the sense in which it is *māyā*—neither absolutely real, nor entirely unreal. It cannot be defined as either the Self or different from the Self.

Some might raise an objection: "If Śaṅkarācārya himself says that the world cannot be described as the Self or as different from the Self, then what exactly has he said? If you call it 'indescribable,' is that not also a definition?" This criticism misses the intent of those who use the term *māyā*. The point is not that there is an entity called māyā that has to be categorized—but that what *appears* as the world cannot be pinned down as truly existent, nor as non-existent. The world appears, but it does not abide. It borrows its existence from the Self, and when not perceived, it resolves into the Self. In that sense, *its only truth is the Self*. That is the essence of the illusion—its apparent being is always dependent on the Self.

Māyā and the Witness Perspective: Distinguishing Appearance from Reality

Light, by its nature, travels in a straight line. If it appears to bend, it is only because something obstructs or refracts it. For instance, when a stick is placed obliquely in water, it appears bent—but only to the eye. In truth, the stick remains straight, as everyone knows. Is it not so? Similarly, when viewed from the standpoint of the empirical knower (*pramātṛ*), the world seems to be filled with multiple enjoyers and enjoyed objects, bound by space, time, causality, action, and result (*kriyā-kāraka-phala*). But when the same is viewed from the standpoint of the witness (*sākṣī*), it becomes evident that the intellect of the *pramātṛ* is itself a delusion (*bhrānti-mātra*). Therefore, merely because the world *appears* through the cognition of the knower, it does not follow that it is as it appears.

This is among the *Universally Accepted Teachings of Śaṅkarācārya*. It does not propose anything new or contrived. Rather, it insists that only from the standpoint of the witness—the changeless awareness that underlies all cognition—can one arrive at a true determination of reality. And in that perspective, the world is not seen as separate at all. Thus, it must be concluded that the substance (*svarūpa*) of the world is none other than the Self (*ātman*).

Nevertheless, when viewed from the standpoint of the empirical subject, the world appears as a sequence of transformation—of creation, manifestation, and dissolution. Though unmanifest during dissolution (*pralaya*), it becomes projected again as name and form during creation (*sṛṣṭi*), appearing in diverse and wondrous shapes. Because the manifest world (*vyākṛta-prapañca*) appears in the Self and seems to emerge from an unmanifest potential (*prakṛti*), it is appropriate to call this potential *māyā*; and the manifest world, a product of *māyā*. Hence the *śruti* declares:
“Māyāṃ tu prakṛtiṃ vidyān māyinaṃ tu maheśvaram”
"Know māyā to be prakṛti, and the wielder of māyā to be the Great Lord.”

Because the world appears through ignorance (*avidyā*), and because it is a false appearance, it is termed *māyā*. And to express that Maheśvara, remaining entirely independent, appears as this world without undergoing any real change, he is referred to as a *māyāvī*—the wielder of illusion.

Parameśvara is omniscient, not because he accumulates knowledge as we do, but because knowledge—non-dual, eternal awareness—is his very nature, just as light is the nature of the sun. **He is omnipotent**, not in the sense of performing acts in time, but because he alone appears as this world while remaining unchanged. That the world appears as it does is due to his power—a power that does not modify him. Hence, the world appears as indefinable, neither wholly real nor wholly unreal.

Now, some interpret the above *śruti* differently. They say that Parameśvara possesses a distinct power called *māyā*, and that *māyā* is the *prakṛti* or material cause of the world. According to them, this *māyā* transforms into the world, while Parameśvara remains untouched. If someone objects—“How is that possible?”—they reply, “Do not apply worldly reasoning here. Because Īśvara is all-powerful, your logic does not touch him. He can both remain unchanged and become the world through his *māyā*.” Such explanations resemble mythological thinking—just as in the stories where deities can sit and stand at the same time. There is little difference between those who appeal to such divine exemptions and those who claim that *māyā* transforms while *Īśvara* remains inert.

And if one presses further, asking how such views could be known or validated, the answer given is: “You cannot yet understand this. Your mind is still impure. When it becomes pure, the experience will arise.” Perhaps. Those who are content to wait for such a revelation may certainly do so. But *Śaṅkarācārya* does not require such expectation of some future mystical experience in order to validate the meaning of *śruti*. From the witness perspective, *prakṛti* and the manifest world appear only to the knower (*pramātṛ*), and that perspective is itself rooted in ignorance (*avidyā*). Those who accept *prakṛti* as something real without recognizing it as *māyā*, have not attended to the second half of the *śruti*:
“...māyinaṃ tu maheśvaram”
—“Know the Lord as the wielder of māyā.”

Who would say, “Know Maheśvara as the *possessed* of māyā”? It is precisely *because* he remains untouched, the *master* of illusion, that he is so described. This meaning is coherent and consonant with the rest of Vedānta.

Thus, in that *śruti* sentence, **prakṛti** and **Maheśvara** are the entities spoken of, while **māyā** and **māyī** (wielder of māyā) are attributes (*viśeṣaṇas*)—not independent substances. It is important to see this distinction clearly.

Thus, since both the knower and the world are appearances born of ignorance, their manifestation or absence has no real consequence for the *Ātman*, the non-dual Self, which is the only reality. The notion that *“I am a knower”* is itself a misunderstanding—a conception born from superimposition (*adhyāsa*). And it is only from within this erroneous standpoint that names, forms, and consequently the world, appear. Hence, we refer to this appearance as *māyā*. But it is crucial to understand that the *Ātman* does not become dual or undergo any modification due to *māyā*.

Does anyone become a father on account of having a son in a dream? Certainly not. Likewise, from the standpoint of absolute truth (*pāramārthika-sattā*), there is no *māyā* in the *Ātman*—not even a trace. In one of his profound verses, the realized sage Śrī Sadāśivabrahmendra declares:

“nātmany kiñcin māyā tatkāryaṁ vāsti vastutaḥ vimale |
iti niścayavān anarhaṣyaty ānandanirbharo yogī ||”

> "In the immaculate *Ātman*, neither *māyā* nor its effects exist in truth. The yogī who is established in this firm conviction remains ever full of joy, reveling within himself."

In perfect consonance with this, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya too affirms in his commentary on Māṇḍūkya Kārikā (4.58):

“māyeti avidyamānasya ākhyā”

> "*Māyā* is the designation of that which, in truth, does not exist."

However, some, without grasping the deeper purport of such statements, object, saying: “Śaṅkarācārya only said that the world is *māyā*; he never said that all this is *Brahman*.” Others go further and argue that if the world is declared *mithyā* (not absolutely real), then the very doctrine that teaches this must also be *mithyā*!

All such objections arise from a failure to understand the true import of words like *māyā* and *mithyā*. They are themselves effects of *māyā*, clouding the clarity of direct insight. Therefore, it is important to reflect more deeply upon the nature of *māyā* and its implications.

That inquiry we shall take up in due course.

22. Maya, Avidya

(20-8-53)

The world, seemingly distinct from the *Ātman*, has no independent existence even when it appears. It is an inexplicable phenomenon—neither truly the *Ātman* nor altogether separate from it. This illusory appearance is of the nature of ignorance (*avidyaka māyā)*. In the state of *suṣupti* (deep sleep), when all appearances are absent, this seeming world remains unmanifest, resolved into the *Ātman*. This itself confirms that its underlying reality is none other than the Self.

However, the usage of terms like *avidyā* and *māyā* by Śrī Śaṅkarācārya has led to confusion among those who fail to grasp his intention. Mistaking these words for reified categories, some imagine strange entities to be posited by *Vedānta*, thereby obstructing a proper understanding of its essential teachings. For this reason, it is necessary to clearly consider: What does *avidyā* mean? What does *māyā* mean?

Śaṅkarācārya explicitly clarifies the meaning of *avidyā* at the very outset of his *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya*. He begins by establishing that no inquiry can take place without first presupposing the one who inquires—the *pramātṛ*, the knower. But this state of being a *pramātṛ* cannot arise unless there is a mutual superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of the Self (*Ātman*), which is pure consciousness, upon the not-self (*anātman*)—the body, mind, and senses. The Self exists by itself, self-revealed and independent, ever illumining all else, undergoing no transformation. In contrast, the body, senses, and mind are not self-revealing, not self-subsistent—they depend entirely on the Self for their seeming existence and appearance, and thus are termed *mithyā*, unreal in the ultimate sense.

Although there is no real relationship between the *Ātman* and *anātman*, human beings naturally fail to discriminate between them and act under the notions of *"I"* and *"mine"*. Śaṅkara states:

"tam etam evaṃ lakṣaṇam adhyāsaṃ paṇḍitā avidyeti manyante"

> “This mutual superimposition—mistaking one for the other—is what the wise refer to as *avidyā*.”

He further declares:

"tam etam avidyākhyam ātmānātmanor itaretarādhyāsaṃ puraskṛtya sarve pramāṇaprameyavyavahārāḥ laukikā vaidikāśca pravṛttāḥ"

> “Upon this mutual superimposition of Self and not-self, termed *avidyā*, are based all transactions involving knower and known, all worldly and Vedic pursuits, all scripture, and all actions prescribed or prohibited.”

Thus, even *śāstra-vicāra*—scriptural inquiry—necessarily begins within the realm of *avidyā*, under the presumption of the *pramātṛ*. This is not denied, but acknowledged as experientially valid within its own domain.

Śaṅkara then points out the way to liberation:

"tadvivekena ca vastu-svarūpanirdhāraṇaṃ vidyām āhuḥ"

> “The discrimination between Self and not-self is the means to determine the real nature of Reality (*vastu-svarūpa*), and this is what is called *vidyā* (knowledge).”

To distinguish the *Ātman* as the sole reality and recognize all else as *mithyā*—that is the knowledge that liberates. Even this distinction between *vidyā* and *avidyā* is a functional transaction (*vyavahāra*) taking place within the realm of *avidyā*. This has already been stated.

The Later Misconception of Mūlāvidyā:

This, then, is the definition of *avidyā* explicitly given by Śaṅkarācārya. Yet, many self-professed followers of Śaṅkara now propose another view. They suggest that this superimposition (*adhyāsa*) is merely an *effect* (*kārya-avidyā*), and that behind it lies a more fundamental, *causal* ignorance—*mūlāvidyā*. They imagine this *mūlāvidyā* to be an eternally beginningless entity, residing in the Self, projecting the world upon it. It cannot be said to be real, for it is removed by knowledge; nor can it be said to be unreal, for it operates and manifests as the phenomenal world. Neither can it be called both real and unreal, for that is self-contradictory. It is said to be neither different from the Self, nor non-different; neither with parts nor partless. In this way, they describe *mūlāvidyā* as a curious, ineffable entity that defies all categories.

According to this view, the manifest ignorance of superimposition (*adhyāsa* or *kārya-avidyā*) arises from this *mūlāvidyā*, and is beginningless in its flow. Since *kārya-avidyā* is seen as a manifest effect and not the ultimate source of bondage, it is said that only *mūlāvidyā* is truly destroyed by knowledge. Unless that is completely annihilated, the destruction of *adhyāsa* is deemed incomplete.

Many still argue in favor of this position today. But the truth of the matter is that Śaṅkara never posited such a *mūlāvidyā* as an entity separate from the superimposition he clearly defined. The elaborate constructions of later dialecticians, however brilliant, must be examined carefully against Śaṅkara’s direct words and method.

On the Misconception of Mūlāvidyā and the Misreading of Māyā:

If one were to ask, “Where has Śaṅkarācārya ever mentioned this *mūlāvidyā* in his *Prasthānatraya Bhāṣya*?”—a perfectly fair question—proponents of this theory often respond with irritation. Though the word *mūlāvidyā* is not to be found anywhere in Śaṅkara’s works, they claim it is nevertheless *implied* throughout his writings, or at least “indicated” in certain places. They point toward the later sub-commentarial literature for explicit definitions, and, since these texts are written by learned scholars, they argue, it is improper to question this so-called traditional doctrine. With this, they attempt to silence all inquiry.

But the fact remains: Śrī Śaṅkara clearly defines *avidyā* as the mutual superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of the *ātman* and the *anātman*, a phenomenon grounded in everyday experience. Against this, the proponents of *mūlāvidyā* ask us to accept, on sheer faith, a wholly indescribable and metaphysical ignorance—one that neither arises from experience nor is explained by Śaṅkara himself.

Let us now consider what these same interpreters say about the word *māyā*. Among those who call themselves followers of Śaṅkara, many contradictory views now circulate. Some

claim that *avidyā* belongs to the *jīva* and *māyā* to *Īśvara*; others argue there is no difference between the two. When asked, “Is such a distinction ever made in the Bhāṣya?”, they quote a passage from the *Sūtra Bhāṣya* (1.3.19):

“Eka eva parameśvaraḥ kūṭasthanityaḥ vijñānadhātuḥ avidyayā māyayā māyāvīva anekadhā vibhāvyate nānyaḥ vijñānadhāturasti”

> “There is only one Parameśvara, changeless, eternal, of the nature of pure consciousness. By *avidyā*, by *māyā*, like a magician by his illusions, He appears in manifold forms. There is no other conscious principle apart from Him.”

From this, they conclude: see, *avidyā* and *māyā* must be two different things!

But how strange is this logic! One can only marvel. It is like reading the Sanskrit sentence *“bhavanaṁ rājñaḥ puruṣo devadattasya”* and interpreting it as “The king’s man Devadatta,” when in fact the syntax makes “devadattasya” the qualifying phrase, not the king. To extract such a distinction between *avidyā* and *māyā* where none is intended is to abuse grammar and ignore the plain sense of the text.

In fact, Śaṅkara himself comments on the *śruti* verse:

“Indro māyābhiḥ pururūpa īyate”

> “Indra assumes many forms through māyā.”

He explains that *Īśvara* appears as the manifold due to *upādhi*, due to perception shaped by ignorance. The names and forms, born of *avidyā*, are what the *śruti* and *smṛti* refer to as *māyā*. As already stated earlier, the term *māyā* denotes what appears *as if* real but is in fact unreal—*i.e.,* it is the name given to illusory appearance. Just as a magician appears in many forms through his power, though he himself is one, so too does *Parameśvara* appear as many through *avidyā*.

To abandon this straightforward meaning and claim instead that *avidyā* is different from *māyā*, that *avidyā* is in the *jīva* and *māyā* in *Īśvara*—what kind of interpretation is this?

Fabricated Notions of Prātibhāsika Objects:

More peculiar still are the imaginative interpretations of *mūlāvidyā*-based thinkers in the context of illusion. Normally, when something appears as something else due to *avidyā*, we naturally understand it to be a misapprehension—an error in cognition. If *Īśvara* appears manifold due to *indriyapratīti*—perception through the senses—it merely means that this diversity is an appearance, not real multiplicity.

Do the senses ever show things as they are, or do they lead to mistaken judgments? It is only our understanding that is erroneous. As described in psychological studies (e.g., in the works of 'Huxley'), a woman once saw a cat on the ground, but on touching it with her foot, realized it was not there. Similarly, she once hallucinated her distant husband’s voice calling her, only to dismiss it upon reflection. In like manner, we mistake the glitter of a conch shell for silver at a distance. Śaṅkara comments:

“Pratyetyeva hi kevalam, na tu tatra rajatam asti” (Sū. Bhā. 4.1.5)

> “There is only the appearance of silver, but there is no silver in fact.”

Yet, despite this clarity, the proponents of *mūlāvidyā* construct elaborate metaphysics around even this illusion. They claim that the *ignorance* residing in the consciousness associated with the shell transforms into the silver; and the ignorance residing in the consciousness of the perceiver transforms into the knowledge of silver. They name this illusory silver *prātibhāsika-rajata*—a projection born of transformed ignorance. One is reminded of the tale of Tenāli Rāmakṛṣṇa tricking a man into believing a bundle of sesame twigs and a buffalo rope were a profound *śāstra* called *Tilakāṣṭha-Mahiṣabandhana*! Similarly, these thinkers would have us believe that illusory silver is somehow an actual product arising and vanishing.

Is this the method of Śaṅkara? Would he ever validate such a convoluted account of error?

The true followers of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya must ask: should we laugh or weep at such reinterpretations? For the sake of restoring fidelity to the *bhāṣyas* and to the living tradition of direct experience, it becomes imperative to re-ground ourselves in Śaṅkara’s own words and his clear method.

On the Interchangeability of the Terms Avidyā and Māyā

Let us now consider: can the ignorance (*avidyā*) spoken of by Śaṅkarācārya rightly be called *māyā*? And can the *māyā* spoken of by him be regarded as *avidyā*? Let us reflect a little on this.

It has already become evident that the Ācārya uses the term *māyā* to refer both to the seed of names and forms—which appear through ignorance—and to the projected appearance of those very names and forms. In this sense, the entire perceptible world is *māyā*. From this standpoint, can *avidyā* be called *māyā*? Certainly. For, everything that is visible to the ignorant is *māyā*; even ignorance itself is perceptible only from the standpoint of ignorance. Once knowledge arises—that is, the recognition that the Self is of the nature of eternal purity, consciousness, and freedom—then both knowledge and ignorance are understood to be non-existent in the absolute sense.

Śaṅkara writes in the *Taittirīya Bhāṣya* (2.8):
“Tasmān nāmarūpapakṣasyaiva vidyāvidye”

> “Therefore, both knowledge and ignorance pertain only to the realm of name and form.”

This establishes that *avidyā*, from this perspective, can indeed be called *māyā*.

But now, can the names and forms—designated as *māyā* by the Ācārya—also be called *avidyā*? Names and forms appear only through *avidyā*. For the knower of Brahman, who has transcended ignorance, they do not appear as real; for such a person, everything is Brahman alone—that is, Brahman-knowledge. Just as we do not regard the objects seen in dreams as real, we often use the word “dream” to stand for what is perceived in a dream. In the same way, what is seen through ignorance can, by figurative usage (*upacāra*), be called “ignorance” itself.

Suresvarācārya writes (Taittirīya Vārttika 2.28):
“Anātmīha yadbhāti tad avidyā-vijṛmbhitam | Tasmād avidyā sāpyuktā vidyā tvātmarūpiṇī ||”

> “Whatever non-self appears here is a manifestation of ignorance; thus, it is called *avidyā*. Knowledge, on the other hand, is the very form of the Self.”

Here, in referring to consciousness as the form of the Self, even the misapprehension (false knowledge) born of ignorance may, in a certain sense, be regarded as a projection of the Self. But from the standpoint of mental modifications (*vṛtti*), both knowledge and ignorance fall within the domain of name, form, and *māyā*. Since they arise as a manifestation of ignorance, both can be metaphorically termed *avidyā*.

Therefore, when seen from the highest standpoint of reality (*paramārtha-dṛṣṭi*), there is no distinction whatsoever between knowledge and ignorance—and hence, no *māyā* either. This is now clearly understood.

From the standpoint of empirical reality (*vyavahāra-dṛṣṭi*), however, the comparison of names and forms to the Self becomes ambiguous—it is neither proper to say they are identical with the Self nor altogether distinct. This is what gives rise to the term *māyā*, conceived by *avidyā*. Within Śaṅkara’s system, the distinction between *paramārthika* (absolute) and *vyāvahārika* (empirical) is a constant feature. Once, a professor in a gathering of earnest seekers joked, “Advaitins have created two boxes: ‘paramārtha’ and ‘vyavahāra.’ They toss everything they agree with into the paramārtha box and everything inconvenient into the vyavahāra box!”—and with a comic gesture, lifted and dropped his legs as if illustrating his point.

Alas, he did not understand the fundamental point: that empirical distinctions, born of ignorance, have no standing in the vision of absolute truth. This is not merely an Advaitic assertion but is true even for dualists. As Śaṅkara writes in his *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā Bhāṣya* (3.5):

“Sarvavādibhiḥ avidyākṛtavyavahārābhyupagamāt paramārthānābhyupagamācca”

> “All schools accept the empirical dealings born of ignorance, and also affirm that in the absolute, these do not stand.”

Even though the bondage of the Self with the body is not ultimately real, dualists still transact in the world with notions like, “I am human,” and so on. They themselves admit that the Self, in reality, has no such attributes. Therefore, the distinction between *paramārtha* and *vyavahāra* truly belongs to Advaita alone—or, more precisely, it does *not* belong to the dualists at all. It is for those who persist in asserting duality as ultimate that this distinction is invoked, using the method of *adhyāropa-apavāda* (superimposition followed by negation), to gradually bring them to the vision of non-duality

Concluding the Discussion on Avidyā and Māyā

With this, the discussion on *avidyā* and *māyā* comes to a close. *Avidyā*, as encountered in the world, is an illusory experience common to all, and I have attempted to explain it to the best of my ability. I have also clarified the sense in which Śaṅkarācārya employs the word *māyā*. In truth, what has come to be known as *māyāvāda* does not occupy a central place in the Ācārya’s teaching. His principal emphasis lies in *brahmavāda*—the affirmation that

all is Brahman. The notion that the Self is embodied, or that it is one among many—this is *avidyā*.

According to the Universally Accepted Teachings of Śrī Śaṅkarabhagavatpāda, the deeply entrenched conviction, "I am the one possessing this body," is not easily removed. As the Ācāryas have declared:

"Dehātma-jñāna-vajñānaṁ dehātma-jñāna-bādhakam ātmanaiva bhaved yasya sa neccann api mucyate" (*Upadeśasāhasrī* 4.5)

> "The ignorance of identifying the Self with the body—once sublated by the knowledge that one is the Self—is itself liberation, even if one does not consciously seek it."

Liberation (*mokṣa*) thus lies in the complete removal of the false understanding: "I am the body," "I am the owner of this body," "I am limited," "I am one among many." This *avidyā* must be destroyed; knowledge (*vidyā*) must arise and sublate it. But it must be noted—this instruction itself belongs to the realm of *avidyā*. From the standpoint of Vedānta, there is truly no *avidyā* to remove, nor *vidyā* to attain. The final knowledge is simply:
"I am the ever-pure, ever-luminous, ever-free Self" (*nitya-śuddha-buddha-mukta-ātma*).

I trust that the nature of knowledge as taught in the Upaniṣads—interpreted in the light of Śaṅkara's Advaita—has now become somewhat clear in your minds through these reflections. Thus far, I have sought to show that the condition of being a knower (*pramātṛtva*) is born of ignorance (*āvidyaka*), and that the witness (*sākṣī*), which merely appears to assume the role of the knower, is in truth our very Self (*ātman*). My primary aim has been to bring about a clear understanding of this truth.

There is yet another method employed in Vedānta to examine and realize the nature of this witness. I shall speak of that tomorrow.

23. Tri-Basic States (Avastha Traya), and the Five Sheaths (Panchakoshas)

(21-8-53)

The Instrumental Role of Vedāntic Methods and the Three-State (Tri-Basic) Analysis

As already mentioned, Vedānta employs various methods to unfold the truth of the Self. These are not ends in themselves but mere means—upāyas—employed provisionally to point to the reality that lies beyond them. The Vedāntin does not cling to any one particular method as absolute, because all methods are ultimately subordinate to the goal of Self-realization. Their value lies in utility, not in ultimacy.

Just as when building a tall house, scaffolding is temporarily erected—carefully secured to support construction, yet discarded once the structure is complete—so too are these teaching methods meant to be dismantled when their purpose is served. No one retains the bamboo used to support the pouring of a wide concrete roof; they are removed as soon as the roof is solid. In the same way, concepts such as creation, Īśvara's entry into

creation, and the cycles of birth and death are introduced by the *śruti* as pedagogical scaffolding—provisional devices—to unfold the knowledge of the oneness of the Self.

As the Kārikā declares:

“Mṛllohavyāghuliṅgādyāḥ sṛṣṭiryā coditānyathā |
Upāyaḥ so’vatarāya nāsti bhedaḥ kathaṃcana ||” (Māṇḍūkya Kārikā 3.15)

> “The various accounts of creation—of clay, gold, sparks, and so on—are intended only as means of instruction. In truth, there is no real multiplicity whatsoever.”

The Upaniṣads offer these accounts not to assert an actual process of creation, but to help the seeker descend from the erroneous belief in multiplicity toward the direct realization of the indivisible Self. This is made explicit in the next verse:

“Sa eṣa neti netīti vyākhyātaṁ nihnute yataḥ |
*Sarvamagrāhyabhāvena hetunājaṁ prakāśate ||” (*Māṇḍūkya Kārikā 3.26)

> “That Self, being without attributes and beyond grasp, is revealed by the method of negation—‘not this, not this’—and thereby shown to be unborn.”

Thus, *neti neti* is not merely a negation; it is a method to prevent any process or pointer from being mistaken for the truth itself. Failing to understand this, some become overly attached to certain procedures, insisting that only their favored techniques are authentically Vedāntic. One says, “This process is essential!” Another objects, “How can there be Vedānta without this method?” Such assertions arise from an affection for inherited modes of thought rather than a deep assimilation of Vedānta’s radical non-duality.

One such method, widely known and often repeated today, is the *avasthātraya vicāra*—the analysis of the three states: waking (*jāgrat*), dream (*svapna*), and deep sleep (*suṣupti*). Indeed, among some modern Vedāntins, it is recited like a formula: “*Avasthātrayasākṣī, pañcakōśavilakṣaṇaḥ*” (“The witness of the three states, distinct from the five sheaths”). But how many pause to deeply contemplate the significance of these three states? How many inquire into what it truly means to be the *sākṣī*—the witness—of all three? How is the non-dual Self (*ātmatattva*) revealed through this line of inquiry?

In truth, *avasthātraya-vicāra* is a profound and subtle method. It cannot be exhausted in a single discourse. Just as a master, before boarding a train, briefly reminds his servants of instructions already carefully given, I will summarize the essential idea here. Those who wish to explore this method more fully should study *Paramārthacintāmaṇi*, published by the Adhyātmaprakāśa Kāryālaya, or read *Gauḍapāda’s Kārikās* and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* with commentary, or seek guidance from those deeply versed in these teachings.

The Three States: A Lifelong Cycle

What is meant by *avasthātraya*? It refers to *jāgrat*, *svapna*, and *suṣupti*—the states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. These are not esoteric concepts; each of us experiences them daily. Our entire life, from birth onward, is but a rotation through these three states, cycling like the wheels of a cart.

- **Waking (*jāgrat*)** is the state in which, through the operation of our senses, we engage with the external world and experience objects.

- **Dream (*svapna*)** is that state in which, though the senses are inactive, the mind continues to function by projecting impressions and creates a shadow-world that mimics waking life.

- **Deep sleep (*suṣupti*)** is the state where both mind and senses are at rest, and one experiences neither subject nor object, only a peaceful absence of multiplicity.

These states occur daily, in an unbroken rhythm. Wherever we go, we do not leave behind our body and senses, and thus these three states continue to accompany us. According to common belief, a life is simply the accumulation of experiences through these recurring phases.

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The Three States and the Mapping of Consciousness

The Upaniṣads, having observed the natural rhythm of waking, dream, and deep sleep, proceed to systematize these into a philosophical framework. They inquire into the operations of the mind during dream, and examine the condition of the *jīva* in deep sleep, when the faculties (*karaṇas*) are withdrawn. Common understanding distinguishes the waking state as one of full awareness, the dream state as a realm of partial awareness, and deep sleep as a blankness or absence of awareness. Modern psychology speaks of subconscious processes in dreams, and even posits flashes of subtle dreams within sleep, which are not remembered upon waking.

Earlier *sāṅkhyas*, especially those who followed Kapila's system, pushed this analysis further. Their position was: these states—*jāgrat*, *svapna*, and *suṣupti*—come and go. They are impermanent. But *I*, the witness of them, remain constant. I observe the changing scenes but am myself changeless. These scenes belong to *prakṛti*; I, the *puruṣa*, am untouched by them. The shifting phenomena do not cling to me; their arrival and departure do not affect my essential nature.

Many modern *Vedāntins* adopt this very approach in their reasoning. They recognize that though the contents of experience differ—waking experiences being relatively stable and dream experiences fleeting—the *consciousness* that lights them is the same in both states. In deep sleep too, one recalls afterward, "I did not know anything." This recollection implies a prior experience of *ignorance*, which itself must have been illumined. That which knows the presence of ignorance must be distinct from it. Hence, even in *suṣupti*, the light of consciousness—*svayaṃprakāśa-caitanya*—remains.

Thus, across the three states, there is one unbroken, self-luminous awareness. It is of the nature of *sat-cit-ānanda*—existence, consciousness, and bliss. This very consciousness, when examined in light of the *śruti* statements such as "prājñaḥ" (deep-sleep self), "taijasaḥ" (dreaming self), and "vaiśvānaraḥ" (waking self), is none other than *brahman*.

The *avidyā* experienced in deep sleep is interpreted by some as *mūlāvidyā*—root ignorance—which constitutes the *kāraṇa śarīra* (causal body) of the *ātman*. In the dream state, the *liṅga-śarīra* (subtle body), comprising the ten senses (*daśendriyāṇi*), *prāṇa*, and mind (*manas*), comes into operation. In the waking state, the *sthūla-śarīra* (gross body), formed from the five-fold *pañcīkaraṇa* of the elements, serves as the medium of experience.

From this reasoning, they conclude that the *ātman* is distinct from the three states. Since the three bodies function only within those three states, it follows that the Self is also distinct from all three bodies—gross, subtle, and causal.

The Five Sheaths and Their Correlation

Alongside this triadic analysis, the tradition also examines the five *kośas*—sheaths or layers that seemingly obscure the Self:

- The **gross body** (*sthūla-śarīra*) is identified with the **annamaya-kośa**, the sheath made of food, visible and perishable.
- The **prāṇa** (vital energy) and **karmendriyas** (organs of action) together form the **prāṇamaya-kośa**—the vital sheath.
- The **manas** (mind) and **jñānendriyas** (organs of knowledge) form the **manomaya-kośa**—the sheath of mental functions.
- The **buddhi** (intellect) along with the same *jñānendriyas* constitutes the **vijñānamaya-kośa**, the sheath of discernment.
- The **causal body**, whose essential nature is unknowingness in deep sleep (*suṣupti*), is considered the **ānandamaya-kośa**—the sheath of bliss, which veils the Self through latent impressions and primal ignorance.

In the waking state, the *annamaya-kośa* is active; it becomes inoperative in the dream state. The subtle sheaths continue in dream, and only in deep sleep are even these dissolved into the causal sheath, wherein the individuality is in a state of unmanifest latency.

We perceive the *prāṇamaya*, *manomaya*, and *vijñānamaya* sheaths (*kośas*) in the waking and dream states; but in deep sleep, none of these are perceived. Only the *ānandamaya kośa*, which is in the form of *mūlāvidyā* (primordial ignorance), remains apparent. Yet even this *ānandamaya* is not present in *samādhi*. In this way, according to these modern Vedantins, the *ātman*, by the discrimination of the three states (*avasthātraya*), is shown to be distinct from the five sheaths (*pañcakośa-vilakṣaṇa*).

However, this *avasthātraya* methodology, as described above, significantly diverges from the approach employed by the *Bhāṣyakāra* (Śrī Śaṅkarācārya). There are several elements within it that run counter to the Advaita *siddhānta* (doctrine). Such views may be accepted only on the strength of scriptural authority (*āptavākya-pramāṇa*), but they are unsupported by direct experiential evidence (*anubhava*). If we examine the *avasthātraya* model that is in agreement with Śaṅkara's *bhāṣya*, the flaws in the now-prevalent

interpretation of this model will become self-evident. Therefore, I shall not now undertake the task of critiquing this newer method. For the present, let us turn our attention to an examination of the *pañcakośa* model.

To begin with, nowhere in Śaṅkara's *bhāṣya* do we find a mapping of the five *kośas* onto the three states. Secondly, we will later see, through comparative analysis of the waking and dream states, that the perception of the five *kośas* is not unique to the waking state; they are also experienced in the dream. This contradicts the claim that specific *kośas* are exclusively operative in particular states. As for the claim that the *ānandamaya kośa*, in the form of *avidyā*, exists in *suṣupti*—this is directly opposed to our actual experience.

Let us now reflect carefully on these modern frameworks. The analysis of the five *kośas* primarily appears in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. Therefore, let us see how the *Upaniṣad* itself presents the description of the *kośas*.

From *paramātman*, through the sequence beginning with space (*ākāśa*), earth (*pṛthivī*) arises; in earth, vegetation grows (*auṣadhī)*, and from that vegetation comes food; from food is born the physical body. This body is composed of the essence of food—it is known as the *annamaya kośa*. The *ātman*, when associated with the limiting adjunct (*upādhi*) of this body, is referred to as the *annamaya ātmā*. Within this *annamaya ātmā* dwells the *prāṇamaya ātmā*.

The *Annamaya Ātman* is described metaphorically as having right and left wings, a central core that is the *Ātman*, and a tail that serves as the foundation for everything. This illustrative structure is applied similarly to the *Prāṇamaya Ātman* as well: *prāṇa* and *apāna* are its wings, *samāna* is its center, and the earth deity (*pṛthivī-devatā*) is said to be its tail. In this way, within this *Prāṇātman* resides the *Manomayātman*; within that is the *Vijñānamayātman*; and within that is the *Ānandamayātman*—each one successively more subtle, filling and encompassing the previous one, and each described with the imagery of wing-tail-self forms (*pakṣa-puccha-ātma-rūpa*).

First, we must clearly understand that the *Annamaya* and other *kośas* are only *upādhis* (limiting adjuncts) of the *Ātman*. Because of association with each such *upādhi*, the *Ātman* is referred to by that name—*Annamaya Ātman*, *Prāṇamaya Ātman*, and so on. This indicates that there are not five different *Ātmans*, but rather one and the same *Ātman* appearing under five different names due to five different limiting adjuncts. Therefore, when these five *upādhis* are negated, what remains is the *nirupādhika Ātman*, the unconditioned Self, which is none other than Brahman.

Secondly, we should not misunderstand these *Annamaya* and other *kośas* to be confined or enclosed in space—*paricchinna rūpa*. If we think that *Annamaya* is inside *Prāṇamaya*, and *Manomaya* inside that, and so on, it would imply that *Ānandamaya* is the most inner and therefore most spatially limited *upādhi*, and that Brahman, described as its tail or support, is even more limited. This would contradict the Upaniṣadic teaching that Brahman is infinite. Therefore, seekers (*jijñāsus*) must understand the Upaniṣadic intent carefully: the terms *Anna*, *Prāṇa*, etc., are spoken of in a *samaṣṭi-rūpa* (collective form), not as individual enclosures.

Anna is the common source from which all beings arise—it is the basis for birth and growth, and it also absorbs beings back into itself. Similarly, *Prāṇa*, *Manas*, and so on, are also to be understood in their collective aspect. All beings—gods like *Agni*, humans,

animals—carry out their functions by depending on *Prāṇātman*, and by it, they are sustained in life. *Manomaya Ātman* is associated with the forms of the Vedas like *Yajus*, while *Vijñānamaya Ātman* is described as *Hiraṇyagarbha*, the subtle principle of all deities. *Ānandamaya* is the fruit of action and meditation (*karma* and *upāsanā*), and since it arises for the experiencer, it is considered more inward than *Vijñānamaya*. Hence, the commentators describe *Ānandamaya Ātman* as dependent on *Vijñānamaya Ātman*.

Thus, the five *kośas* are to be understood in terms of their collective manifestation. For this reason, *Sureśvarācārya* writes in his *Vārtika*:

"kāryāṇāṁ kāraṇātmatvaṁ evaṁ syād uttareṣv api | brahmānanam bhavet evaṁ sāṅkhyarāddhānam anyathā ||" (*Tai. Vār. 268*)

Meaning: Just as *Annamaya* has been identified with *Virāṭ*, the causal whole, so too must the next *kośas*, *Prāṇamaya*, etc., be understood in terms of their causal identity. Only then can Brahman be properly known as infinite. Otherwise, it would lead to the *Sāṅkhya* view that accepts many limited *puruṣas* (selves), each confined to its respective body.

Thirdly, it must be understood that the five sheaths are progressively subtler and interpenetrate one another. But this does not mean that one sheath exists independently and merely pervades the other like water inside a pot. Here, the *Śruti* does not aim to establish five independent *kośas*. Instead, it uses their progressive absorption into one another to teach the *Ātman*, which is of the nature of *sat* (pure being). Just as clay pervades a pot, each succeeding sheath is said to pervade the previous ones. But ultimately, it is the *Ātman* alone that pervades and supports all these *kośas*. This is the essential point to be grasped from the commentary.

Clarifying the Status of the Five Sheaths in Light of Śaṅkarācārya's Teaching

[Editor's Note: This lecture was originally quite concise. When it was prepared for publication, some requested that it be expanded slightly, so it has been lightly elaborated here. Those wishing to explore the subject in greater depth should refer to the writings and discourses of Śrī Swāmiji.]

Śaṅkarācārya writes: "Therefore, all living beings are not limited to being selves identified with the *Annamaya*. What then? Even the *Prāṇamaya*, which is enclosed within it, common to all, pervading all bodies—humans and others—is to be understood as the Self. Likewise, the progressively subtler sheaths such as the *Ānandamaya*, which arise from elemental constituents such as space and so on, and are caused by ignorance (*avidyā*), are all called the *self* of beings. Similarly, that which is natural, the cause of space and all else, eternal, unchanging, all-pervading, and of the nature of truth, knowledge, and infinitude—that which transcends the five sheaths—is verily the *Self of all*. For He alone, in the highest sense, is the Self of all." (Tai. Bhā. 2-3)

Thus, not the limited *Annamaya ātmā*, but the *Prāṇamaya*, which pervades all, is the self of beings. Extending further, even the subtle sheaths up to *Ānandamaya*—which are more interior and born of the elements like space—are to be understood as selves, but all of them are born of *avidyā*. Ultimately, the true Self (*ātman*) of all is not these sheaths, but that which is natural (*svabhāvika*), the cause of even space (*ākāśa*), eternal, immutable, all-pervading, and of the nature of *satyam-jñānam-anantam*. That Self, distinct from the five sheaths, is the *sarvātmā*, the Self of all in the supreme sense.

This same view is echoed in the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā Bhāṣya*:
"*rasādayo hi ye kośā vyākhyātās tittirīyake | teṣām ātmā paro jīvaḥ khaṁ yathā saṁprakāśitaḥ*" (3.11)
The sheaths beginning with rasa (taste)—i.e., the five *kośas* explained in the *Taittirīyaka*—are illumined by a deeper Self, the Supreme, just as space pervades and reveals all.

Moreover, the Bhāṣya adds:
"*yasmād ātmanaḥ svapnamāyādivad ākāśādi krameṇa rasādayaḥ kośalakṣaṇāḥ saṁghātāḥ ātmamāyā visarjitāḥ*"
From the *Ātman* alone—just as in dream or illusion—the aggregates in the order of space (*ākāśa*), characterized by sheaths like *Annamaya*, arise through the *Ātman's māyā*. This underscores that these *kośas*, imagined through ignorance, must be resolved back into the Self through Self-knowledge. This is the clear teaching of the Upaniṣad.

Hence, the purpose of examining the five sheaths (*pañcakośa-viveka*) is not, as in the *Sāṅkhya* system, to identify the *puruṣa* as separate from the bodies. Rather, it is to reveal that all the *kośas* are false appearances (*mithyā*), and that the one *Ātman*—the basis of all—is the nondual Brahman of the nature of *satya*, *jñāna*, and *ānanda*. As the earlier quotation from the *Taittirīya Bhāṣya* (2-3) stated: "The five sheaths, ending with the *Ānandamaya*, are caused by ignorance." For those who grasp this properly, the modern view that the *Ānandamayakośa* itself is ignorance stands clearly opposed to the *siddhānta*.

Further, there is the Shruti declaration:
"*asann eva sa bhavati, asad brahmeti veda ceṭ*" — "He becomes nonexistent, who regards Brahman as nonexistent."
Why does this passage refer only to Brahman, and not to *Ānandamaya*?

Śaṅkarācārya explains in the *Taittirīya Bhāṣya* (2.5):
"*na hi priyāśirādyavayavaviśiṣṭe pratyakṣato'nubhūyamāne ānandamaye ātmany brahmaṇi nāsti brahmeti āśābhāvāt 'asann eva sa bhavati' iti manodāharaṇam upapadyate*"
This mantra would not apply to *Ānandamaya*, which is directly experienced with parts such as *priya* as its head, etc., because there would be no occasion for the doubt "Brahman does not exist." Hence, this statement refers only to Brahman, not to *Ānandamaya*.

Also, in the *Sūtra Bhāṣya* (1.1.9), he writes:
"*api ca ānandamayasya brahmatve priyādyavayavatvena saviśeṣaṁ brahma abhyupagantavyam; nirviśeṣaṁ tu brahma vākyaśeṣe śrūyate vāṅmanasayor agocaratvābhidhānāt*"
"If one takes *Ānandamaya* to be Brahman, then one must accept Brahman as having parts and attributes like *priya*, etc., which contradicts the *nirviśeṣa* (attribute-less) nature of Brahman described later in the same section, as beyond speech and mind."

The Nature of Bliss and the True Meaning of Ānanda in Vedānta

What follows from this is that since *Ānandamaya* is directly experienced, it is indeed a sheath with attributes (*saviśeṣa*), and its variability across individuals is evident:

"*pratiśarīraṃ ca priyādibhedāt ānandamayasyāpi bhinnatvam*" (Sū. Bhā. 1.1.19) —

Because *priya*, *moda*, *pramoda* (degrees of joy) differ from one individual to another, *Ānandamaya* too is said to differ accordingly. Such variability in *Ānandamaya* is absent in *suṣupti* (deep sleep); for, in *suṣupti*, no direct experience of such gradations occurs, nor is it a state associated with attributes. This shows that *suṣupti* is not to be equated with the *Ānandamayātman*. The experience of *suṣupti* varies neither by individual distinctions nor by perceptible parts, and hence it cannot be categorized as a saviśeṣa state.

For this reason, it is traditionally held that *Ānandamaya* constitutes the causal body (*kāraṇa śarīra*) and has its basis in *avidyā* (ignorance). The inspiration or *chetanā* that abides in *suṣupti* arises from this causal sheath. However, recent interpreters of Advaita, failing to attend to these distinctions, have superimposed interpretations that are contrary not only to the *śruti* and Bhāṣya literature but also to direct experience — and such interpretations do not serve the seeker's true inquiry.

In the explanation of *Ānandamayātman*, the *ānanda* (joy) that is experienced is not final; rather, it is shown that Brahman is the substratum (*pratiṣṭhā*) of even that joy. What is imagined by *avidyā* as the sheath is removed by *vidyā* (knowledge), and what remains — Brahman — is that which supports all such appearances. The Bhāṣyakāra makes it clear: in the second and third sections of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, the aim is to reveal the *ānanda-svarūpa* — the essential nature of Brahman as bliss. Therefore, the seeker (*jijñāsu*) should keep in mind that the *pañcakośa-vicāra* (discernment of the five sheaths) culminates in the revelation of non-dual *ānanda*.

The Reality of Bliss — Brahman as the Source and Substance

How do we know that Brahman exists? The *śruti* begins by affirming the existence of Brahman as the *kāraṇa* (cause) of everything, including space. After creating all elements, Brahman is said to have entered into the *hṛdaya-guha* (heart-cave) and become the inner self — the very *I* known within the *antaḥkaraṇa*. Thus, Brahman is not only posited as existing, but as the very *rasa* — the essence — of all that exists. Those who attain this *rasa*, say the *śruti*, become blissful.

Even in the absence of external enjoyment, those who have realized Brahman abide in joy, because that joy is not from outside — it is the very nature of the Self. Were this *ānanda* of Brahman not universally present, how could anyone live, how could anyone function in the world? This rhetorical question itself is the *pramāṇa* (proof) for the existence of Brahman as bliss.

Although we touch this bliss every day, we do not know its taste. Like one who swallows sweet milk without letting it linger on the tongue, we fail to savour it. The joys we experience in the world are nothing but *Brahmānanda*, appearing limited due to *avidyā*. Life is fearful for the unrefined, who are unaware of this bliss; but for the wise, who know the Self as bliss, life is utterly fearless — such is the teaching of the *śruti*.

All Joy is Ātmānanda, Not Object-Derived

Even mundane joy (*viṣayānanda*) is essentially *Brahmānanda*. In the *Ānandamayakośa*, *sukha* appears in gradations: *priya* (the joy of seeing the desired object), *moda* (the joy of attaining it), and *pramoda* (the expansive joy upon possessing it). But the common *ānanda* pervading all these is the Self — the *ānanda-svarūpa ātmā*.

When one obtains a desired object — be it a child, a friend, or wealth — as a result of prior merit (*puṇya*), the *tamoguṇa*-covering in the mind momentarily lifts, and the *ānanda* which is the Self appears to shine forth in the purified mind. That *ānanda*, reflected in the mind, is what we call *viṣayānanda* (object-derived joy). But because the object that occasioned it is impermanent, the joy too seems fleeting.

We behave as though this *ānanda* came from the object. But really, it is our own *ānanda*, which was merely re-expressed when the obstruction was removed.

An Analogy: Rediscovered Joy is Mistaken for New Joy

Consider this example: A father takes his son to the market. The child demands something at every shop: "Buy me this! Buy me that!" Meanwhile, the father quietly takes the boy's hat and tosses it onto a nearby roof. The boy now turns his attention to the lost hat and starts pestering for that instead. When the father retrieves it and places it on the boy's head, the child overflows with joy — "Let's go home now!" he says contentedly.

Was anything new gained? No. What was lost and forgotten was regained. Similarly, the *ānanda* that was always with us appears to return when the mind turns toward a desired object. This is the truth behind our experience of joy.

It is a misconception that joy comes from objects. In truth, all joy is *Ātmānanda* — the bliss of the Self. The seeming gradation of bliss (*adhika-anūna*) arises due to conditions in the mind, not in the Self. In reality, there is no division or gradation in bliss — this is what Ācārya Śaṅkara affirms in the *Taittirīya Bhāṣya*.

Gradations of Joy and the Nature of Bliss

In the pursuit of happiness, the attainment of desired objects often brings a sense of joy. However, this joy fundamentally arises from the cessation of longing for lesser objects. Consider an individual endowed with youth, virtue, scholarly wealth, a robust desire for progress, physical strength, and material prosperity—both seen and means for future happiness. The Taittiriya Upanishad elucidates a hierarchy of joy, beginning with the unit measure of human happiness. It posits that the joy experienced by the *gandharvas*—celestial beings born of virtuous deeds and worship, endowed with subtle faculties—is a hundredfold that of humans. This exponential increase continues upward through the realms of *deva-gandharvas*, ancestors (*pitṛs*), deities by birth, *karma devas*, *haviṣmat devas*, Indra, Bṛhaspati, Prajāpati, culminating in the bliss of Hiraṇyagarbha. Notably, those in higher states do not covet the joys of the lower, indicating a transcendence beyond comparative pleasures. The Upanishad asserts that the bliss of Hiraṇyagarbha is accessible to a *śrotriya*—one well-versed in the scriptures—who remains free from desires, having cultivated detachment from all else. This gradation underscores that variations in joy correspond to the purity of mind and the objects attained. Yet, amidst these varying degrees, the underlying constant is Brahman—the Self of all beings. The joys experienced in the phenomenal world are but fractions of this supreme bliss. Veiled by ignorance (*avidyā*), this inherent bliss appears diminished; as ignorance, desires, and actions wane, the bliss becomes more manifest. In those steadfast in Brahman, this joy shines forth naturally, devoid of subject-object division. To impart this understanding, the Upanishad employs the methodology of the five sheaths (*pañcakośa-vicāra*), guiding seekers to discern the substratum of unalloyed bliss beneath the layers of apparent experience.

The Non-Overlapping Nature of the Three States

Transitioning to the examination of the three states (*avasthā-traya*), the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad provides a comprehensive analysis, succinctly encapsulated in the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad. Ācārya Gauḍapāda, in his *kārikās*, expounds upon these states, offering profound insights. For those aspiring to delve deeper into the nature of these states, it is advisable to study these texts under the guidance of a competent teacher, engaging in attentive listening (*śravaṇa*), reflection (*manana*), and deep meditation (*nididhyāsana*). Herein, we present a concise overview of this process.

The term *avasthā-traya* refers to the three states of consciousness: waking (*jāgrat*), dreaming (*svapna*), and deep sleep (*suṣupti*). These states occur within the same individual, implying that the experiencer—the Self—is distinct from them. Vedāntic inquiry utilizes this understanding to reveal the non-dual nature of the Self (*saccidānanda*), which transcends all worldly appearances. Seekers are encouraged to diligently contemplate this process to grasp its profound implications.

A critical aspect of this contemplation is recognizing the vastness inherent in each state. Ordinarily, individuals perceive themselves as existing within the world, engaging with the waking state alongside others. However, Vedānta posits that within the waking state, all phenomena—categorized as pertaining to the individual (*ādhyātmika*), the external world (*ādhibhautika*), and the divine or cosmic forces (*ādhidaivika*)—are encompassed. This includes all perceived external entities such as mountains, rivers, oceans, celestial bodies, as well as internal faculties like the life force (*prāṇa*), senses, mind, intellect, and ego. The witnessing consciousness that observes all these is the subject of the waking state. Similarly, the dream state comprises its own internal world of impressions, with the Self remaining as the witnessing entity. In Vedāntic terminology, the consciousness associated with the waking state is termed *Viśva* or *Vaiśvānara*, that with the dream state is *Taijasa*, and that with deep sleep is *Prājña*.

An essential hallmark of understanding this process is acknowledging that the waking and dream states are mutually exclusive, with no real interconnection. Each state's world is confined to its respective realm; phenomena from one do not intrude upon the other. For instance, an injury experienced in a dream cannot be addressed with remedies from the waking state, nor can the afflictions of the waking state be alleviated by dream experiences. These states lack causal relationships in terms of space and time. One might dream of being a king reduced to a beggar, enduring hardships, only to awaken and find no trace of such events in the waking reality. Despite daily experiences of such dreams, individuals often erroneously infer causal connections between the waking and dream states. Even contemporary scientists may interpret dreams as mere reflections of waking impressions. However, a closer examination reveals that these states are entirely independent, each operating within its own domain.

The Scope and Method of Avasthātraya-vicāra

To grasp the teaching concerning the three states (*avasthātraya*), it is essential to adopt a comprehensive and collective perspective. One must clearly see that the world perceived in each state belongs exclusively to that state alone, and that these states—waking, dream, and deep sleep—do not overlap or connect with one another. Alongside this, one must discern the presence of the unchanging witness (*sākṣī*) who illuminates the entirety of these experiences without undergoing any transformation.

Crucially, we must recognize that the proofs (*pramāṇas*) and logic which arise from the waking standpoint have no authority in this inquiry. Though sufficient for transactional dealings within the waking state, they are inadequate when addressing the nature of reality as revealed through the totality of all three states. What is of true value here is that which remains consistent across all states: direct experience (*anubhava*) that transcends state-bound distinctions. The reasoning that accords with this universal experience alone possesses decisive authority.

The Mutual Exclusivity of Waking and Dream

Let us now approach the heart of the *Śruti*-based inquiry. The world perceived in the waking state—replete with its *ādhyātmika*, *ādhibhautika*, and *ādhidaivika* divisions—does not appear in the dream. Moreover, it does not exist anywhere during the dream. To suggest that it persists elsewhere is to suppose that we are both awake and dreaming simultaneously—a contradiction in terms. Just as the dream world and its contents vanish during wakefulness, so too the waking world entirely vanishes during the dream.

Even if one were to raise the objection, “But are not others awake while I am dreaming?” such doubt collapses once we recall that positing the waking state as running concurrently with dream entails affirming both states at once, which is self-defeating. Therefore, waking and dream are not two coexisting realities; when one is, the other is entirely non-existent.

The Illusion of Distinction Between States

The very imagination of there being two states—waking and dreaming—is born of attachment to the waking perspective. For if we observe rightly, in a dream we do not feel it to be a dream. We feel that we are in the waking state and that everything before us is real. Thoughts of real and unreal, past and future, all arise in that dream-waking. The same structures of waking consciousness—temporal movement, perception of reality, engagement with objects—all arise within the dream as well.

Indeed, many strive to demonstrate a distinction between waking and dream. But none of those distinctions are present to the one who is dreaming. No one in the dream affirms, “This is a dream, and I have come here from the waking state.” Thus, from within the dream itself, no criteria for its falsity present themselves. Śrī Gauḍapāda, in his *Kārikā*, particularly in the *Vaithathya Prakaraṇa*, establishes that waking and dream are fundamentally of the same kind—both are states witnessed by the self and both are equally unreal.

The Deep Sleep State: The Great Negation

Let us now turn to the state of *suṣupti*, deep sleep, where there is no appearance of any world or scene. In that state, neither the waking world nor the dream world are experienced by anyone. Yet, even after this, people continue to presume that the world exists “outside” of themselves during sleep. But if one follows the reasoning presented above, such a conclusion is clearly erroneous. If the waking world were still “somewhere” during deep sleep, then once again, all three states—waking, dream, and deep sleep—would have to exist simultaneously, which is experientially absurd.

Hence, these three states are mutually exclusive. When one is present, the others are not. The one constant throughout them all—the witness who observes their arising and cessation—is alone the unchanging reality. That witness, the *Ātman*, is of the nature of

absolute reality (*paramārtha*), while the world, bound to these states, cannot be considered ultimately real. Thus it is said:

“Svapnaṁ jāgaritaṁ cobhau yena’nupaśyati | mahāntaṁ vibhum ātmānaṁ matvā dhīro na śocati ||” (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 2.1.4)

"He who sees both the waking and the dream states as not separate from the witnessing Self, who contemplates that Self as the vast, all-pervading Reality, that wise one does not grieve."

The Witnessing Self: Beyond the Limited Ātman

The Śruti reveals that the form in which we perceive the three states—waking, dream, and deep sleep—is not the ultimate reality, but merely appearances seen against the backdrop of a deeper, more pervasive truth. That which sees all these states without change—that alone is our real form, the *Ātman*. This is the true purport of the mantra.

When in the waking state, we assume the *Ātman* associated with waking to be our self. When dreaming, we assume the dream *Ātman* to be our self. Yet, both these are conditioned and limited projections. The true *Ātman* is the unchanging witness of both—the one who sees waking and dream come and go. It is subtler and more real than any particular state, for it persists while states arise and dissolve.

The Falsity of Sorrow and Joy

Once this is understood, it becomes clear that all dualities experienced in the waking state—wealth and poverty, health and disease, youth and old age, fame and infamy—are no more real than the illusions of a dream. They bind and delude only because of ignorance. But when one realizes that one's real nature is untouched by waking or dream, sorrow and joy lose their grip. The very examination of the three states thus gives us a glimpse into how to rise above the mind’s fluctuations of pleasure, pain, and fear.

The Mutual Exclusion of the States

Going further, careful reflection reveals that these states do not possess independent or lasting value. When one state is present, the others disappear entirely. The space and time of the dream are entirely distinct from those of the waking world, as our own experience testifies. Since they do not coexist, and since one disappears when the other is present, they cannot be considered truly real, nor can they be counted together as three co-existing realities.

In counting things as one, two, or three, they must be either side by side in space or follow one another in a common time. But these three states share neither space nor time. Hence, it is incorrect to treat them as three real entities, or to relate them causally.

Not States *of* Ātman, but Superimpositions *upon* Ātman

It is like one man seeing a rope and mistaking it as a snake, another as a crack in the ground, and another as a stream of water. It would be erroneous to count these as three separate entities or to link them with causal relationships. Similarly, it is wrong to treat

waking, dreaming, and sleeping as three distinct states of the Self, or to imagine that the Self passes through them.

The Self does not traverse these states sequentially in time. It does not become conditioned by them. It is *advitīya*—the non-dual, unchanging *cinmātra* (pure consciousness), the *ānandamātra* (pure bliss) that shines unaffected by the sorrows and joys of the passing states.

Thus, the *Śruti* declares: *"tasya traya āvasathās trayaḥ svapnāḥ"* "He has three abodes, three dreams"—affirming that these so-called states are but appearances, not realities.

Śrī Gauḍapāda expresses this in his kārikā:
"anādimāyayā supto yadā jīvaḥ prabudhyate |
ajam anidram asvapnam advaitaṁ budhyate tadā ||"
"Long asleep under the spell of beginningless *māyā*, the jīva, when awakened, comes to know the unborn, sleepless, dreamless, non-dual Reality."

The *jīva*, deluded by ignorance, says: "I am asleep; I have dreamt; I am awake. I am so-and-so's son, so-and-so's father, so-and-so's grandfather. This is my house, my land, my money, my family, my fame, my pleasure, my sorrow." In this way, he spins endlessly in *saṁsāra*. But when awakened by the teaching of a compassionate *ācārya*, he realizes: "I am not bound by *saṁsāra*; I have no *dharma* or *adharma*, no birth or death, no body-mind aggregate, no waking, dreaming, or sleeping, no sorrow or joy. I am the non-dual Self—*saccidānandasvarūpa*." And he rejoices in his own infinite freedom.

This is the meaning of the *kārikā*.

A Teaching Grounded in Experience

Thus, the processes of analyzing the three states (*avasthātraya-vicāra*) and the five sheaths (*pañcakośa-vicāra*) are not speculative or based on mere logic or scriptural assertion. They are rooted in universal experience, and they reveal that the Self, the *Ātman*, is ever free and full.

Advaita does not rely on blind belief or dialectical cleverness. As the dialogue between the Brahmin and his wife in the *Anugītā* illustrates, the realization of Truth is here and now, in this very life, for those prepared through inner discipline.

The fruit of this teaching, however, blossoms only in the minds of those qualified to receive it—those who are endowed with *śraddhā*, *viveka*, *vairāgya*, and the longing for liberation (*mumukṣutva*).

24. Ātmasatyānubhodha, Manōnigṛaha

(22-8-53)

The Witness and the Apparent Puzzle of States

Yesterday, we discussed the inquiry into the three states. As discussed previously, the entire world of the waking state—whether considered individually or collectively—exists only within that state. The knower (*pramātṛ*), the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and the object of knowledge (*prameya*) all appear solely in that state. Even space and time, which

seem fundamental, are contained within the waking state. Hence, the waking state is not situated *in* space or *in* time, nor is it an object for a separate knower.

The essence of our nature—the witness that observes the entire waking state—is not the *pramāṭṛ*. It does not perceive the state with the help of any instrument of knowledge. Nor does it undergo any change in the act of perceiving. By its very nature as consciousness (*chaitanyarūpa*), it remains ever itself. In its mere presence, the waking world appears as though witnessed.

The Witness is Not the Experiencer of States

In truth, this so-called "witnessing" is itself a subtle enigma. The one who experiences the state is not the witness. Neither the objects that appear in the state, nor the sensations arising therefrom, nor the states of happiness and sorrow, pertain to the witnessing consciousness. These pertain to the *pramāṭṛ* alone. But how then, including the *pramāṭṛ*, does this entire world of appearances come to be observed?

Before answering this, we must first closely examine our actual experience of the states. While experiencing any state, we seem to assume the role of the *pramāṭṛ*. But when we turn to understand the totality of the state—including the condition of being a knower—we arrive at the unattached witness (*sākṣisvarūpa*). Logically, it is true that the state must be known from the standpoint of this witness. However, this is not a conclusion drawn from direct experience. When we are in the role of the *pramāṭṛ*, we employ logic. But in the experience of the *sākṣī*, there is no logic operating at all.

Dream and Deep Sleep: The Subtle Nature of Memory

If we compare this to the memory of dreams or deep sleep, the nature of this paradox becomes more evident. Everyone says in waking, “I saw this dream,” yet the one who says it is the waker. During the dream, there was no waking-state knower present, nor any instrument of knowledge. Nevertheless, we all accept that there is something like a memory of a dream.

The case of deep sleep is even more perplexing. No *pramāṭṛ* exists in that state. Yet we say, “I slept well. I knew nothing.” What is the meaning of such a statement? Despite the absence of any active knower in deep sleep, there arises a notion akin to memory. This is a strange phenomenon indeed.

Sureśvarācārya addresses this in his *Vārtika*:

> “*na suṣuptiḥ vijñānaṁ nājñānam iti smṛtiḥ |*
> *kālādyavyavadhānatvānna hyātmasthamatītabhāk ||*
> *na bhūtakālakaḥ pratyakṣajñānam iha īkṣyate |*
> *svārthadeśaḥ parārtho'rtho vikalpastena sa smṛtaḥ ||*”
> (Bṛhad. Vārtika 1.4.300–301)

There is no *vijñāna* (knowledge) or *ajñāna* (ignorance) experienced in deep sleep. The notion “I knew nothing” is not truly a memory, because memory depends on separation in time, which is absent here. What always remains in the Self appears to be remembered as “past.” No perception ever occurs in time past, nor is there any pratyakṣa (direct cognition) of time as a separate entity. Hence, this notion is a mere *vikalpa* (imagined conceptualization).

No Real Memory, Only Conceptual Projection

Thus, time does not exist apart from the Self. The individual *ātman* is not truly related to the past or future, for it is that by which time itself is known. Hence, what appears as a memory of deep sleep is only a seeming recollection—an imagined conceptual projection (*vikalpa*) in the non-dual Self.

In truth, even the idea that we see the world as the *sākṣī* and then report it later as the *pramātṛ* is without logical basis or experiential foundation. In the unattached witnessing Self (*sākṣicaitanya*), this state and its contents only *seem* to appear. This very appearance, this sense of relation, is but a *vikalpa*, devoid of any real object.

The Illusoriness of States and the Reality of the Witness

What is proven through the consideration of the *avasthātraya prakriyā* is that the three states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, and deep sleep—are not different from the witness (*sākṣi*). However, due to ignorance, we imagine these states to be distinct. Just as, when we see a snake in place of a rope, the rope itself is not seen, and when we see the rope, the snake disappears, in the same way, when one recognizes the Self as the witness, neither the states nor the world appears. Conversely, when the states appear, the witness is not recognized. Therefore, just as the experience of the rope negates the experience of the snake, the realization of the witness negates the experience of the states and the world.

The Self is eternally stateless (*nitya-niravastha*) and ever free from illusion; to see states and a world within it is an illusion (*māyā*) born of ignorance (*avidyā*). Yet, just as a man's shadow, though non-different from him, appears as a second due to delusion, similarly, the states and the world appear to be different from the non-dual, stateless, illusion-free Self.

The Witness as the Sole Reality

Taking this apparent multiplicity as a doorway, the seeker resolves upon the Self that witnesses the states. Upon such resolution, as when one understands that the shadow is not another entity but only oneself, it becomes evident that the Self alone is the truth, and nothing else truly exists apart from it. Śrī Gauḍapāda states:

> *ātmasatyānubodhena na saṃkalpayate yadā |*
> *amanastāṁ tadā yāti grāhyābhāve tadagraham* || (Māṁḍūkya Kārikā 3.29)

When one attains realization of the Self alone as the truth and discerns that there is no object apart from the Self, then the mind, which arises in the presence of objects, ceases, and the state of *amanastā* (no-mind) is attained.

Where then do the knowable objects and the mind, which is the means of knowing, go? Everything becomes the Self. Even now, the Self, mind, and knowable objects are truly only the Self. But upon realization, there is no separate mind or object remaining. Waves, bubbles, and foam in the ocean are only water; when it is known that everything is but the ocean, what remains to be separately counted as wave or foam?

From this standpoint, the question of the world arising from the Self does not even arise. The world does not exist as a real entity, and thus, there is no need to "remove" it through knowledge. It is also not true that there was ignorance in the Self which was then

removed. The desire to know the Self itself does not remain. One becomes the Self. All becomes the waveless ocean of Self-bliss.

As Śrī Sadāśiva Brahmendra has sung:

> *sarvaṃ brahmamayam re re ||*
> *kiṁ vacanīyam kimavacanīyam |*
> *kiṁ racanīyaṁ kimaracanīyam ||*
> *kiṁ boddhavyaṁ kima boddhavyaṁ |*
> *kiṁ bhoktavyaṁ kima bhoktavyaṁ ||*

Everything is Brahman. What then is there to speak? What to be silent about? What to do? What to not do? What to know, and what not to know? What to enjoy, and what to abandon?

The Contentment of the Jñānī

This does not mean that a *jñānī* acts arbitrarily. He has known what is to be known and is content. He is full, having drunk the nectar of knowledge. Just as one whose belly is full of nectar does not crave salt water, similarly, for one established in truth, there remains nothing to accomplish. He is no longer a servant of injunctions and prohibitions. He remains ever content, immersed in the contemplation of the Real.

One might ask: do joys and sorrows not appear to him? Is he not subject to hunger, thirst, disease, old age, or death? Do these not persist even in the best of sages? These doubts arise naturally. There are two responses.

From the ultimate standpoint, only the non-dual Self is real. That Self is the *jñānī*. For him, there is no hunger or thirst, no old age or death. He does not even possess a mind apart from the Self. Therefore, he does not suffer. This is a state to be known only through Self-realization.

From the transactional standpoint, though experiences such as joy and sorrow may occur, they are sublated by his knowledge. Just as one may feel sadness when a real cat drinks real milk, but only joy when seeing a painted cat drink painted milk, so too the *jñānī* views the world's joys and sorrows as the play of Brahman. Because he abides in contemplation of the ultimate, his actions may seem odd to the worldly. But he is untouched by suffering.

To offer an analogy: the pain of hunger is experienced by all. But there is a great difference between the hunger of one who has no food and the voluntary hunger of one who fasts on *Ekādaśī* or *Pradoṣa* as a form of *sādhana*. One who fasts for the contemplation of the Self is not pained by hunger; that very fast becomes a source of bliss.

The Fearlessness of Self-Knowledge and the Rare Path of *Asparśa Yoga*

Thus far, we have spoken of the highest class of aspirants—those who, through listening to the scriptures and the words of a realized teacher, come directly to the recognition of the Self, and abide ever in the bliss of non-duality. From the standpoint of the highest truth, this realization is indeed the simplest of attainments. It is like a man, anxious about the absence of money, putting his hand into his pocket and finding a coin that was already

there. In the same way, the Self is attained simply by turning one's attention toward oneself.

But this is no mere trick, nor a shortcut accessible to all. The truth it reveals is radical: the dissolution of all duality, the transcendence of individuality, and the quiet annihilation of the ego. Many recoil at such a prospect. They fear the very fearlessness that Advaita holds out.

Śrī Gauḍapādācārya describes this path as *asparśa-yoga*—the yoga of non-contact. He writes:

> *asparśayogo vai nāma durdarśaḥ sarvayogibhiḥ |*
> *yogino bibhyati hyasmādabhaye bhayadarśinaḥ ||*
> *(Māṇḍūkya Kārikā 3.39)*

This yoga, which is known as *asparśa* (free from contact or relation), is difficult to behold, even by accomplished yogis. Though it is a path of utter fearlessness, the yogis, who are accustomed to seeing fear even in the fearless, tremble before it.

The Threat of Egolessness

Other paths of yoga, though arduous, promise visions, powers, and progress. The seeker is rewarded with mystical experiences and confirmatory signs. In *asparśa-yoga*, however, there is no such contact, no such duality. The triad of knower, knowledge, and known disappears. Most unsettling of all, the very "I" that stands as the subject dissolves first. This is what frightens many.

In the preface to his *Vedāntasāra*, Colonel Jacob (a Christian writer) remarks: "The idea of merging our personality into another principle is as terrifying as it is absurd." It must have seemed to him that Brahman is a separate principle into which one must plunge like a man drowning in the sea. That thought alone was enough to cause fear. Nor is this hesitation limited to those outside the tradition. A certain *Vedācārya*, refuting Śaṅkara's Advaita, exclaims: *ahamartha vināśaścennokṣa ityadhyavasyati |*
apasarpedasau mokṣakathāprastāvagannataḥ || mayi naṣṭe'pi matto'nyā kācijñaptiravasthitā | iti tatprāptaye yatnaḥ kasyāpi na bhaviṣyati ||

If liberation means the destruction of the ego-identity (*ahamartha*), he says, then one should flee from any discussion of liberation! Even if the ego is destroyed, he protests, if some other knowledge remains, who would want it? Is such a liberation not closer to suicide than to freedom?

A Devotee's Fear of Being Swallowed

Let us illustrate the absurdity of such fear with a simple tale. A certain man, to exhibit his extreme devotion, used to wail in the temple: "O Lord, when will you take me into Your Self? Are You not my protector?" One day, after the crowds had left and his wailing grew louder, a booming voice came from behind the deity's idol—spoken by a hidden priest—declaring: "Child, don't be afraid. I will take you into Myself this very day. Come!"

Hearing this, the devotee—terrified that the deity might actually do it—ran out of the temple without looking back!

Clarification: Advaita is Not a Merger into the Unknown

Such fear arises only when Brahman is mistaken for something *other* than oneself. But the truth that Advaita teaches is this: *Brahman is not another principle into which one must dissolve—it is your own Self*. It is of the nature of knowledge (*jñāna*) and bliss (*ānanda*), and there is nothing fearful in attaining it.

If someone were to tell us that we are not, in truth, bound beings mired in sorrow and limitation, but are ever-free and of the nature of bliss—it would be a cause for rejoicing, not dread! There is no loss, no destruction, no drowning. The Self is not annihilated; it is merely recognized for what it always was. Yet, like children who fear going to school, we fear this very recognition.

But let us not be disheartened. If we gradually begin to understand our true nature, the fear will vanish entirely. And when the truth is realized—that the Self is bliss—it will be as the Upaniṣad declares:

> *ānandaṃ brahma vidvān na bibheti kutaścana*
> "He who knows Brahman as bliss fears nothing whatsoever."

We will have no fear of anything. Let us continue the present discussion.

The Path for Those of Moderate Fitness

The great ones who have realized without doubt that the Self is none other than *Paramātman*, and that the mind is merely an illusory appearance within it—like a snake imagined in a rope—abide ever fulfilled in the bliss of Brahman. But for those in whom the mind still appears as a knot entangled with the Self, is there a way to arrive at the same fearless realization? This, we must now consider.

For seekers of moderate or even lesser qualification, there is indeed a method. After receiving the teachings of the scriptures and the instruction of the teacher, they must engage in sustained contemplation (*manana*) and meditation (*nididhyāsana*), and thereby gradually come to a direct experience of the Truth.

The Role of the Veda as *Pramāṇa*

What has been taught thus far rests upon the authority of the Vedas. The Veda is a *pramāṇa*—a means of valid knowledge—which reveals reality as it is. A *pramāṇa* does not create or produce what is not already present; it does not bring into being the non-duality (*advitīyatva*) or non-worldliness (*asaṃsāritva*) of the Self. Rather, it simply reveals what already *is*.

To illustrate: a milestone may read, "25 miles to such-and-such a city." That inscription does not make the city 25 miles away; it only points to a reality that already exists. Similarly, for the most qualified (*uttama adhikārīs*), mere hearing of the Vedānta śruti is enough—they gain knowledge immediately. But for others, that same truth must be contemplated repeatedly until it becomes assimilated.

The Place of Reasoning in Realization

Contemplation (*manana*) involves reasoning. But since reasoning itself arises from experience, reasoning that contradicts experience—*kutarka* or false logic—is of no value. Many, enamored of intellectual gymnastics, indulge in endless argumentation. But when a truth has already become one's experience, reasoning becomes not only unnecessary but even obstructive.

As Swami Vivekananda once remarked, "God does not totter, leaning on logic." Those who have directly seen the truth have no need for elaborate proofs. But for those who have not yet arrived, reasoning—*in harmony with* experience—is a necessary aid, leading one toward that experience. This is the true purpose of all contemplative works in Vedānta.

Thus, *mumukṣus*—those who sincerely seek liberation—must not remain at the level of scriptural words. If immediate knowledge does not arise from hearing, they must inquire. In texts that emphasize reasoning, they must accept only those arguments that support the unfolding of direct realization. In time, clarity and experience will dawn.

The Primacy of Experience (anubhava)

Ultimately, it is *experience* that matters—not intellectual discussion or scriptural quotation alone. Self-knowledge does not arise despite the reading of countless books and participating in elaborate debates, because this essential point is forgotten.

If the Self is truly non-worldly (*asaṃsārī*), of the nature of existence-consciousness-bliss (*saccidānanda*), and non-dual (*advitīya*), then why is it not evident right now? Why does the Self appear to be bound, sorrowful, and dual?

The scriptures themselves give us a clue: even when the sun is shining brightly in the sky, we may fail to see it—either because we are not looking in the right direction, or because there is a defect in our vision. In the same way, the nature of the Self remains unknown either because we do not look *where* we ought to look, or we do not look *as* we ought to look.

This is why the discipline of *nididhyāsana*—deep, steady, and repeated meditation on the truth of the Self—is indispensable for most seekers.

What is *nididhyāsana*? It is the deliberate and sustained meditation upon the Self—not as an imagined object, but as one's own real nature (*svarūpa)*. Importantly, the word "meditation" (*dhyāna*) is used in multiple senses, and it is essential to distinguish them clearly.

Two Kinds of Meditation

The first sense of meditation refers to *upāsanā*—the devotional contemplation of an object held in reverence. For instance, considering a Śālagrāma stone as the embodiment of Viṣṇu is *upāsanā*. Welcoming a guest and serving them food with the feeling that they are Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa incarnate is also a form of *upāsanā*. Likewise, imagining the Supreme Lord seated in one's heart, possessed of the attributes described in scripture, is another mode of this devotional practice.

In such *upāsanā*, knowledge of the object's real nature is not the focus. What matters is repeatedly contemplating, in the manner prescribed, that the object with divine attributes

exists in the stated locus. When performed sincerely, this contemplation yields the result promised by the scriptures.

Nididhyāsana as the Assimilation of Truth

However, *nididhyāsana*, as we are discussing it here, is of a wholly different kind. It is the effort to *assimilate the truth of the Self*, as taught in the Upaniṣads—not a superimposition, but a turning of the mind towards what *is*.

The Upaniṣads declare:

> *eṣa sarveṣu bhūteṣu gūḍho''tmā na prakāśate*
> *dṛśyate tvagryayā buddhyā sūkṣmayā sūkṣmadarśibhiḥ*
>
> "This Self, though hidden in all beings, is not manifest. He is seen by subtle seers through their sharp and refined intellect."

The *Ātman* is ever-present in all beings, but is obstructed by *māyā,* conjured up by *avidyā*. He does not reveal Himself to intellects that are crude or unrefined. Only those who have purified the inner instrument (*antaḥkaraṇa*) through karma, devotion, and disciplined living, and who have cultivated a concentrated and subtle intellect, become capable of glimpsing Him.

The Need for Subtle Vision

The Self is extremely subtle—*sūkṣma*. Finer than the senses, subtler even than the mind, the Self eludes ordinary modes of perception. Just as clear water may appear pure to the naked eye but reveals microscopic impurities when observed under a lens, the mind too must be sharpened and focused to discern the Self.

There is a vast difference between how a layperson looks at a gemstone and how a trained jeweler examines it. The jeweler, with trained concentration and discrimination, perceives its subtle qualities and defects; to the ordinary eye, a worthless pebble and a precious gem may appear alike. So too, the vision of the Self requires a clarity and depth of seeing that ordinary attention cannot afford.

This refined practice of vision and interiorization is what the Upaniṣads call *adhyātma-yoga*—the inner discipline of Self-realization.

The Teaching of *Adhyātma-Yoga* in the Kathopaniṣad

The *Kaṭhopaniṣad* presents this teaching in a series of steps given by Yama to Naciketā:

> "The wise should merge speech into the mind, the mind into the *jñānātman*, the *jñānātman* into the *mahān-ātman*, and that into the peaceful Self."

This layered teaching outlines the progressive internalization of all faculties into the Self.

- Speech into Mind: 'Speech' here represents all sense activities. When one recognizes that the senses are not separate from the mind—that the mind itself assumes the role of eye, ear, etc., as needed—then the senses are figuratively "dissolved" into the mind.

- Mind into *Jñānātman*: This mind, then, is to be resolved into the knowing principle—the *jñānātman*, which underlies and pervades the mental functions.

- *Jñānātman* into the Great Self: Beyond this knowing faculty lies the *mahān-ātman*, the universal intelligence principle, the source from which all cognition arises.

- That into the Peaceful Self: Finally, even this must be dissolved into the Supreme, which is tranquil, formless, and beyond all functions—the *śānta-ātman*, the Self of all.

On Dissolution and Identity

It is vital to understand that this “dissolution” (*laya*) is not annihilation. Just as the snake imagined in the rope is ultimately known to be nothing but rope, so too, the dissolution of mind, intellect, and faculties means the clear recognition that none of these are separate from the Self. To know this is *nididhyāsana*.

This is not a symbolic or imaginative exercise. It is not *upāsanā*. The *śruti* itself states that the object of *upāsanā* is *not* Brahman. This is *tattva-dhyāna*—contemplation upon the truth of one’s own being as taught by the scriptures and revealed by the teacher.

And by this practice, even those who are not of the highest qualification will come to realize, just as surely, that the Self alone is real.

The intellect (*buddhi*) must be refined and steadily established in the awareness of the Self. In truth, there is no intellect apart from the Self. Yet, to the ordinary mind, it appears as if the intellect is something distinct. For such seekers, this practice aims to dissolve all faculties into the Self—not by annihilation, but by discernment. That very Self, which is *nirviśeṣa* (free of all attributes), *avikriya* (unchanging), *sarvāntara* (the innermost essence of all), and the witness of all mental modifications, must be recognized as the *śānta ātman*—the peaceful Self, the Supreme.

This "dissolution" (*laya*) does not mean ceasing to exist; rather, it means arriving at the recognition that the Self, which seems veiled by ignorance, is in truth the Self of all. Just as the snake imagined on the rope was never different from the rope, so too, the intellect and all faculties imagined to be distinct are never other than the Self. The Upaniṣads call this the path of *adhyātma-yoga* (inner union); Śrī Gauḍapāda, in the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*, refers to it as *mano-nigraha* (restraint of the mind). In the Bhagavad Gītā, this very process is taught under the name of *dhyāna-yoga*, the yoga of meditative absorption as an inner means to Self-knowledge.

On Mistaking Yogic Methods for Self-Knowledge

However, many are misled by the word "yoga," assuming it refers to the Yoga of Patañjali. They imagine that realization requires mastering elaborate *āsanas*, *prāṇāyāma* techniques, or even gaining supernatural powers (*siddhis*). "One must rise a cubit off the ground," they say, or "see light in meditation." Such yogis preach miraculous attainments—but like the man who lost his horse while chasing the thief who stole his brother-in-law, those who run after such showmanship often lose whatever real spiritual momentum they had.

Some follow such yogis who wear vermillion on the forehead and carry a staff, thinking they are masters of truth. But nowhere do the *śāstras* proclaim that these kinds of yogic feats are necessary for *brahma-jñāna* (knowledge of Brahman). No teacher (*guru*), however capable, can forcibly confer realization. The *śāstra* remains what it is; and even the guru only points to the truth impartially.

Realization Must Arise Within

The seeker (*mumukṣu*) must realize the Self through his or her own inquiry. Hence, it is unwise to hope that some externally performed service to a so-called yogīśvara will lead to liberation. Let us return to the core term *nididhyāsana*.

Yājñavalkya, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, tells Maitreyī:

> "*ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ*"
>
> "O Maitreyī, the Self indeed is to be seen, heard about, reflected upon, and meditated upon."

Here, no Patañjali Yoga is mentioned as the means. In the language of the *Kannaḍa Bhārata*, "*ālisai janamējayaṇe*" means “Listen carefully, O Janamejaya.” Similarly, *nididhyāsasva* means: “Look within—intently and directly—and bring the truth into living experience.”

The Meaning of *Mano-nigraha* and the Discipline of the Mind

The word *mano-nigraha*—restraint of the mind—appears in the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*. What does it mean there? The Kārikā and its commentary make it clear that controlling the mind does not involve physically binding it, as if with a rope. Rather, it is an inner discipline that must be undertaken with persistent and unwavering effort, free from weariness. The mind, by nature, is restless and prone to wander among sensual enjoyments. If left unchecked, it sinks into tamas and falls asleep. Therefore, it must be vigilantly awakened and trained with skillful means.

A *sādhaka* must reflect that all worldly pleasures end in sorrow. This fact is supported not only by logic but by daily experience. Even pleasures that appear sweet turn bitter in the end. If this truth is clearly held in mind, the mind gradually loses its attraction to sensual indulgence. Some may dismiss this insight as "Buddhist thought" and reject it. But does a statement lose its truth simply because it came from the Buddha? What is logically and experientially sound must be accepted, regardless of who said it.

Even the Buddha did not deny that happiness exists in the world; rather, he emphasized that such happiness is fleeting and ultimately gives way to suffering. A genuine seeker (*sādhaka*) must take this to heart. One must contemplate: "Nothing is truly born at all; this is all Brahman, beyond birth, change, and decay." Anchoring the mind in this recognition, taught by *śāstra* and *ācārya*, prevents it from wandering outward or lapsing into sleep.

Just as a wayward cow is shown green grass and gently led into the cowshed and tethered, so too the mind must be guided inward and restrained. Mere cessation of distractions and sleepiness is not sufficient; even in stillness, the mind may harbor latent desires. Therefore, one must apply it to contemplation of the Self. At that point, a new kind of joy arises—*svarūpānanda*, the joy of one's true nature. This may momentarily enchant

or delude the mind. Yet even that joy must not distract. One must discern: this mind is not other than the Self; it is only a manifestation illumined by Self-awareness. On its own, the mind can accomplish nothing. This insight must be brought to memory again and again.

With long and devoted practice, imbued with reverence, the mind itself becomes resolved in the Self. Then dawns the experiential certainty: the one non-dual Self alone is the Supreme Reality. All else is mere appearance.

What has been described so far is the path of *adhyātma yoga*, the inner discipline, known also by the terms *nididhyāsana* and *mano-nigraha*. It is not a path of imaginative projection. As *śruti* makes clear, Brahman is not the object of *upāsana* (meditative worship). This discipline is the focused contemplation of the true nature of the Self, as revealed by *śruti* and expounded by the *ācārya*. By this means, even seekers of middling qualification—like those of the highest—attain the realization that the Self alone is the truth.

25. Upāsanā

(23-8-53)

Jñāna and Dhyāna: Distinguishing Knowledge from Meditation

In the Upaniṣads, two distinct mental states are designated by the term *jñāna* (knowledge), and the failure to clearly distinguish them has given rise to a variety of divergent interpretations. Many commentators believe that the *jñāna* referred to in the Upaniṣads is identical with *dhyāna* (meditation). However, only those rooted in the tradition of Śrī Śankarācārya distinguish a different kind of *jñāna*, separate from *dhyāna*, and hold that the ultimate purport of the Upaniṣads lies in *jñāna* alone.

The Essential Difference

What is the difference between *jñāna* and *dhyāna*? This is clarified in the Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya:

"*Dhyānam cintanam yadyapi mānasam, tathāpi puruṣeṇa kartum akartum anyathā vā kartuṃ śakyaḥ. Puruṣatantratvāt. Jñānam tu pramāṇajanyam. Pramāṇam ca yathābhūtavastu-viṣayam. Ato jñānam kartum akartum anyathā vā kartum aśakyam. Kevalam vastutantram eva tat. Na codanātantram, nāpi puruṣatantram. Tasmāt mānaso'pi jñānasya mahad vailakṣaṇyam.*"

"Though both *dhyāna* and *jñāna* are mental, there is a great distinction between them. *Dhyāna* is an action (kriyā); *jñāna* is not."

Dhyāna is a deliberate activity. As with any action (*karma*) enjoined by the scriptures, it is optional and subject to individual effort. One may choose to engage in it, not to engage in it, or perform it differently. It is puruṣatantra — dependent upon the individual. Not everyone engages in scriptural *dhyāna*; only those who understand its prescription and possess the desire and qualification to undertake it do so. Others construct meditations based on their own imaginations, which, lacking scriptural sanction, amount to mere delusion. For instance, imagining a post as a thief in the dark is a misconception and not a

means of attaining any puruṣārtha (human goal). By contrast, meditation as prescribed in the *śāstras* yields the appropriate fruit — such as contemplating a *śalagrāma* as Viṣṇu, or viewing a woman as fire in the context of the *pañcāgni vidyā*.

The Nature of Jñāna

Now let us consider *jñāna*. True knowledge is the recognition of an object as it truly is, born from a valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). For example, knowing fire as fire is such *jñāna*. This cognition is not subject to personal will. One cannot choose to know fire as something else; knowledge depends entirely on the nature of the object. If fire touches the skin, it burns. This knowledge is not subject to personal manipulation and cannot be negated.

Hence, *jñāna* is vastu-tantra — dependent on the object. The *śāstra* cannot command someone to understand fire as water; if it did, it would cease to be a valid *pramāṇa*. Some allege that *śāstra* sometimes teaches things contrary to experience (e.g., that fire is cool), but in such cases, Śaṅkarācārya in the Gītā Bhāṣya explains that those statements must be interpreted differently.

True Knowledge as the Remover of Ignorance

Thus, *jñāna* is the removal of ignorance. It dispels the absence of true knowledge, doubt, and misapprehension through valid cognition. Once this true knowledge dawns, there can be no further delusion concerning that object. According to the tradition of Śaṅkarācārya, the *jñāna* spoken of in the Upaniṣads as the cause of *mokṣa* is precisely this kind of object-dependent knowledge (*vastutantra-jñāna*). Hence, in his system, *bandha* (bondage) is the product of *avidyā* (ignorance), and liberation (*mokṣa*) is the fruit of its destruction through knowledge.

Self-Knowledge and the End of Transmigration

Brahman is none other than the Self (*Ātman*), ever pure, ever conscious, ever free, and of the nature of bliss. In this Self, there is no trace of the notion "I am the transmigrator" (*saṃsārī*). The knowledge that "Brahman is my true nature" is *ātma-jñāna* (Self-knowledge). The measure of this knowledge is the disappearance of the false notion "I am the doer, enjoyer, or bound one." Whomever this knowledge truly occurs to, for them, the *saṃsāra-svarūpa* is dispelled.

This destruction of the transmigratory identity is not some invisible, post-mortem result like the attainment of heavenly enjoyments; it is a *dṛṣṭa-phala*—a result that must occur simultaneously with knowledge itself.

Clarifying the Role of *Upāsanā*

We must now distinguish this knowledge (*jñāna*) from meditation (*upāsanā*). Although the term *upāsanā* is often used in the Upaniṣads in the sense of object-dependent cognition (*vastutantra-jñāna)*, here, for clarity, we shall restrict it to refer to *subject*-oriented contemplation (*kaṛṭṛtantra-upāsana*), where the seeker actively maintains the sense of devotion or proximity to the Lord.

Since such worship or contemplation is performed in accordance with scriptural injunctions, it must follow the prescriptions of *Vedānta-śāstra*. Comparable practices are

found in other religions as well—Christianity and Islam, for example, speak of the worship of a Supreme Being. Christians describe God as love incarnate; the Qurʾān describes Him as supremely compassionate. The Bible says, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." Some Christians interpreted this as a call to turn away from worldly concerns and focus on the divine. The term *repent*, in its Greek origin, is now often taken to mean "change your way of thinking."

From a Vedāntic perspective, one might interpret such a verse as a directive to abandon the superimposed identity of the transmigratory self and contemplate "I am Īśvara." But Christians, in general, do not draw such metaphysical implications. Even when the Bible declares, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you," few identify this with the Upaniṣadic teaching of *yo veda nihitaṁ guhāyāṁ parame vyoman…*—"He who knows the Brahman hidden in the cave of the heart…" Nor do they understand it as pointing to the essential unity of the *jīva* and *Īśvara*.

Some contemplative Christians and Islamic *ṣūfīs* might accept a sense of closeness to God within the heart, but generally, they do not accept the teaching of *tattva-jñāna* as Śaṅkara expounds it, nor the method by which *avidyā* is to be dispelled through Self-knowledge. Their emphasis remains on personal devotion and grace through a historical figure—Jesus or Muḥammad—whereas Vedānta does not consider any ācārya, however exalted, to be essential for *jñāna* in the same way.

The Teacher as a Pointer, Not a Proxy

However, in Vedānta, neither knowledge (*jñāna*) nor meditation (*dhyāna*), as expounded therein, is said to be dependent upon or constituted by the teacher (*ācārya*). While it is certainly accepted within Vedānta that instruction from a competent teacher is desirable for the attainment of Self-knowledge (*tattva-jñāna*), we must take careful note that the knowledge itself is not said to be dependent upon the teacher as such. What is required is that the disciple, following the method indicated by the teacher, must himself directly bring the teaching to one's own *anubhava* to realize the truth.

Moreover, the teacher cannot always be physically present with the disciple. After all, is it not the disciple himself who must undertake the discipline and come to clarity through his own effort?

Once, it is said, a renowned scholar told a certain gentleman: "Accept me as your guru; I shall instruct you in the method of meditation (*upāsanā-krama*)." To this, the gentleman replied, "I consider as my guru only that one who is ever present with me." Not grasping the intended import of that statement, the scholar insisted, "Very well, let it be so. I shall always remain with you and bear the responsibility of resolving all your doubts." At this, the gentleman asked, "Will you follow me even into *suṣupti* (deep sleep)?" the import of the anecdote became clear: the *Paramātman* alone—the innermost Self of all beings—is the true teacher. That alone remains through waking, dream, and deep sleep, untouched by change, and ever self-luminous. One who imparts the teaching of *Īśvara* through *upāsanā* or contemplation is a teacher in the secondary sense (*gauṇa-ācārya*). But the one who has realized that *Paramātman*, the Self of all, is none other than the Self—such a teacher alone may rightly be called *ācārya* in the primary sense, for no distinction remains between him and the Supreme.

The Distinctive Character of Upāsanā in Vedānta

Let this much be set aside for now. Though other religious scriptures also speak of the worship (upāsanā) of the Supreme Lord (Parameśvara), the unique feature of the upāsanā taught in Vedānta lies in this: it takes as its subject that very Reality (Brahman) which is immediately and here itself available to direct experience, and which is taught in the Upaniṣads on the basis of universal experience (*sārvatrika-anubhava*). Thus, the Brahman that is to be meditated upon in Vedānta is not something to be believed in merely on faith; rather, it is the ever self-evident Self of all beings (*sarvātmā*).

In contrast, since such Self-knowledge (ātma-jñāna) is not taught in other religious systems, the aspirant in those paths must rely solely on faith in the God they posit. What pramāṇa (means of knowledge) is there to support the claim that this or that is the Supreme Lord? And how are we to believe that worshipping Him will yield merit in another world? If it is said that one must believe these things based on the authority of religious texts like the Bible or the Quran, then we may ask: have the authors of these scriptures themselves returned from those worlds to report their experiences? What is the basis by which living individuals can describe realms that are supposedly accessible only after death?

For such skeptical inquirers, who remain caught in an endless chain of doubt, these religions offer no satisfactory answers. It is true that some meditative traditions within these religions claim fruits of meditation even in this life—but those results, though spoken of, have no basis in universally accessible experience. If there is any truth in those practices, that too must be validated on the basis of Vedāntic knowledge alone.

Hence, even when teachers (*ācāryas*) instruct forms of upāsanā prescribed in the Vedāntic texts, there remains a distinguishing feature—these practices are grounded in the nature of universal experience.

The Nature of Brahman as the Object of Upāsanā

Let us now return to the main discussion. Since the Brahman that is the object of upāsanā is none other than our own Self, and since the entire non-Self universe is imagined within that Self, all actions, instruments, agents, and their results ultimately resolve into the Supreme Self (Paramātman). Yet He is not merely these transactional elements—He also transcends them, abiding in His pure, untouched nature.

There is a well-known Purāṇic episode that illustrates this. When Śrī Kṛṣṇa was playing with the cowherd boys (gopālas) and tending to the cows, Brahmā once stole away all the cows and boys through his māyā. But when he returned to observe the result of his act, he saw that all the cows and boys remained exactly as before, and Kṛṣṇa Himself was present as each and every one of them, while still retaining His own divine form. This story encapsulates a deeper Vedāntic truth—that the Supreme Lord, through just one fourth (*pāda*) of His being, appears as all forms in the universe, while the other three quarters remain untouched and eternal, transcending the world (as *Pāramārtha*). This idea is explicitly taught in the Veda and symbolically conveyed in the narrative.

Multiple Forms of Upāsanā in the Upaniṣads

The Upaniṣads expound various forms of upāsanā, arranged in an ascending sequence that yields increasingly superior results. In certain portions of the texts, those engaged in the study of the Vedas are instructed to meditate on the specific Vedic mantras *(śabda*) associated with their own branch (*śākhā)*. Elsewhere, upāsanās are prescribed to enhance

the efficacy of the Vedic rituals themselves. Yet in other places, meditations are taught for the fulfillment of specific human desires (*kāmas*) attainable through such worship.

Apart from these, some Vedāntic sections even prescribe Brahma-upāsanās—meditations on Brahman—meant to take the aspirant along the northern path (*uttara-mārga)* to Brahma-loka, where one may enjoy divine prosperity and, through further knowledge acquired there, attain gradual liberation (*krama-mukti*). The knowledge of the Supreme Self (*Paramātma jnana*) aims to purify and concentrate the mind, and the upāsana-s that are necessary to achieve this are taught.

Upāsanās indeed yield varied results, and one should undertake the specific form of contemplation that corresponds to the desired outcome. However, the vision of the Upaniṣads does not culminate in such visible or invisible fruits. Rather, its true purpose lies in cultivating mental steadiness and directing the minds of intermediate seekers—those not yet prepared for direct Self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*)—toward the contemplation of the Self (*Ātman*).

By declaring that all results may be obtained through the contemplation of the Supreme Self (*Paramātman*), the scriptures turn the aspirant's mind away from outer objects and toward the inward reality. Yet, it should be noted that even limited results may accrue from *Parameśvara-upāsanā*. If a king is capable of granting an entire province, there is no doubt he can also grant a single house. Likewise, the Vedas affirm that food, the capacity to enjoy it, cattle, children, and other such fulfillments may be obtained through *brahmopāsanā*.

As the Supreme Lord is contemplated as the inner Self (*ātman*) of all beings, the results naturally conform to that vision. This is the solemn assurance of the *śruti*.

Faith in the Veda and Divine Grace

Weary of relying on impermanent things, beings should turn to the Veda as they would to a compassionate mother or father. With steadfast devotion, they should contemplate the Supreme Lord (*Parameśvara*), knowing that their aspirations will be fulfilled. The attribution of results to *Īśvara* does not imply that they arise miraculously, outside the order of nature. Rather, the fruit of *Īśvaropāsanā* is the product of action (*karma*) aligned with the cosmic law (*ṛta*).

The grace of *Īśvara* does not suspend causality, but acts as the unseen hand that reduces the effort, facilitates the capacity to enjoy the fruit, softens sorrow through the experience of fulfillment, and ensures that the result is wholesome and enduring.

One may ask whether this is mere theory. The speaker here affirms, with humility, that such fruits have indeed been experienced—to the extent required—and were received through the grace of the Lord. The purpose of this statement is not to boast, but to point out the efficacy of such *upāsanā* and to offer it as a useful means for those with faith. Since *upāsanā* involves an element of trust, one must place confidence in the Vedic scripture and in the words of those who speak from genuine experience.

The Lord as the One Worshipped Everywhere

The Supreme Lord (*Parameśvara*) is One, and He alone pervades all beings—both animate and inanimate. Therefore, wherever *upāsanā* is performed, it is truly worship of

Him. Yet, the manifestation of His presence varies according to the nature of the worshipper's mind and the specific form of contemplation. The *śruti* and *smṛti* enjoin us to meditate upon Him using the highest and most exalted symbols.

Since *upāsanā* necessarily involves a triad—the worshipper (*upāsaka*), the worshipped (*upāsya*), and the act of worship (*upāsanā*)—it belongs to the domain of *avidyā*, which governs the world of difference and transaction. Nevertheless, *avidyā* admits of gradations. A pleasant dream and a nightmare are both dreams, yet they differ vastly in their effects. Similarly, scriptural knowledge and actions are superior to secular knowledge and actions.

The Role of Scriptural Upāsanā

Though *upāsanā* too belongs to the sphere of *avidyā*, it is a *śāstra-janya-jñāna*—a knowledge born of the scripture—and serves to elevate and refine the mind. Such contemplation, performed with purity and devotion, imparts a serenity and joy beyond that of worldly attainments. Hence, those who are qualified should engage in *Parameśvaropāsanā* with deep faith, and aspire for *mokṣa*—the supreme liberation—rather than squandering the opportunity on petty gains.

It would indeed be folly to approach a wealthy benefactor and ask only for a pinch of snuff or a matchstick. So too is it unwise to invoke the Supreme Lord for trivial ends, when He is capable of bestowing the highest bliss and peace.

On the Power and Scope of Upāsanā

The principle that the form of the object of contemplation gradually manifests to the mind of one who meditates upon it with constancy applies equally to the mind itself. Among the many kinds of *upāsanā*, two are particularly praised for their efficacy: *pratīkopāsanā*, wherein the Supreme Lord (*Parameśvara*) is envisioned through various symbols or forms, and *aham-grahopāsanā*, in which the contemplator recognizes that *Parameśvara* is none other than their own *Ātman*. These two, when practiced with faith and clarity, bestow the highest results.

To illustrate the nature of such *upāsanās*, the Upaniṣads present the revered *Śāṇḍilya Vidyā*. Although the Supreme Self (*Paramātman*) is truly without attributes (*nirviśeṣa*), the *śruti* instructs us to superimpose certain attributes derived from effects—namely, the manifest world—in order to contemplate Him as the cause of all. This superimposition is purposeful, not for falsifying His nature, but for aiding concentration and inner absorption.

The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* says:

> "All this is Brahman. Because it is born from Him, lives in Him, and merges back into Him. In whatever form a person is filled with contemplation (*bhāvanā*), he attains the same in the next world. Therefore, one should meditate upon Him as: mind-like (*manomaya*), with the body made of life-force (*prāṇa-śarīra*), of radiant form (*bhā-rūpa*), of true resolve (*satya-saṅkalpa*), all-pervading like space, subtle, formless, the doer of all actions, the enjoyer of all desires, possessing all fragrances, all tastes, and having permeated this whole world, yet without instruments of action and without any craving for enjoyment. He is my own *Ātman* residing in the heart. After departing from this

world, I shall attain Him alone."
—Thus teaches the sage Śāṇḍilya.

Contemplating upon such a Lord with full conviction and without doubt, one realizes *Īśvara-bhāva*—the state of divine identity. With firm knowledge that "He is me," the aspirant internalizes the attributes of the Supreme and attains *sāyujya*, the oneness with *Parameśvara*, both here and hereafter. This is the intended meaning of this Upanishadic passage.

The Accessibility and Scope of Vedic Upāsanā

However, such *upāsanās*—as formal *vidyās* rooted in the *Vedas*—are not accessible to all. As they require familiarity with Vedic study and Vedic Sanskrit, those outside the traditional learning may find them difficult to practice. Even among Brahmins, many today neglect Vedic study. How then can such contemplations be performed?

The *śāstra* offers a solution. Those who are eligible and have access to the *Vedic corpus* may supplement their practice by referring to parallel teachings found in different *śākhās*, such as the *Agnirahasya* in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* or discussions in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. These texts offer supplementary attributes and conclusions (*upasaṁhāra*), which may be integrated according to the *Mīmāṁsā* principle of *guṇa-upasaṁhāra-nyāya* (the rule of incorporating qualities). Such detailed and precise *upāsanā* is meant for highly qualified, introverted seekers under the guidance of a *guru*, and they invariably bear fruit.

Yet, what of the rest of us?

The Compassion of the Ṛṣis and the Role of the Purāṇas

Out of great compassion, the ancient *ṛṣis* composed the *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas*, filled with accessible and profound *upāsanās* suitable for the current age. These are to be practiced earnestly by all sincere seekers.

Here, too, faith is essential. Even without present-day *adhikāra* (qualification) in Vedic recitation, one can study the *Rāmāyaṇa* with some knowledge of Sanskrit and grasp its meaning. It is said that when the Supreme Lord, knowable through the *Vedas*, incarnated as *Śrī Rāma* for the upliftment of the world, the *Veda* itself took the form of the *Rāmāyaṇa* through *Vālmīki*. Thus, if one accepts the *Rāmāyaṇa* as *Veda*, there need be no hesitation in accepting that *Śrī Rāma*, described therein, is none other than the Supreme Being, and that the auspicious qualities glorified by *Vālmīki* are the divine attributes of the Lord.

Though *Śrī Rāma* was born in *Ayodhyā*, He traversed the land on foot, blessing all beings with His *darśana*. He still dwells in Ayodhyā—the Ayodhyā within the heart's inner sky—and grants vision to those who worship Him with devotion. If we perform *upāsanā* with the conviction that this body is a holy *kṣetra*, a sacred field of *Rāma*, the realization of His presence is assured.

Likewise, the *Śaiva Purāṇas* and other sacred texts prescribe diverse forms of *upāsanā* by which even modern aspirants may attain inner fulfillment.

26. Types of Meditations (Upāsanā-s)

(24-8-53)

Besides object-dependent knowledge (*vastutantra-jñāna*), the *Upaniṣads* also acknowledge person-dependent knowledge (*puruṣatantra-jñāna*). *Upāsanā*—contemplative worship—is of this latter kind, being under the control of the aspirant. Since mental action is volitional, one may engage in it, suspend it, or modify it at will. This discretionary character distinguishes *upāsanā* from object-dependent knowledge and classifies it as a *puruṣatantra*.

A key distinction must be drawn between the operation of *jñāna*-vākyas—statements of Self-knowledge—and *upāsanā*. For the highly qualified (*uttama-adhikārīs*), the sentences of Vedānta regarding the nature of the Self can directly give rise to immediate and experiential knowledge. When this does not occur, auxiliary disciplines such as *manana* (rational reflection) and *nididhyāsana* (deep contemplation) become necessary. *Manana* means examining the teaching with reasoning consistent with one's experience (*anubhava sammata tarka)*. *Nididhyāsana* refers to focused contemplation on what has been heard, in a systematic manner, until it is brought into one's own direct intuitive experience (*anubhava*). These lead to *ātmasvarūpa-jñāna*—knowledge of the innate nature of the Self.

Upāsanā, however, is of a different order. Its fruit is not immediate. There is no scope for inquiry or analysis as with *manana*, nor can it be readily harmonized with reason. It must be accepted entirely on the strength of *śruti* (scriptural authority). For example, if the scriptures enjoin meditation upon the Supreme Lord possessing a particular form, residing in a particular locus, with defined attributes, one must accept the instruction as it is—without subjecting it to logical scrutiny. The purpose of *upāsanā* is to abide by the intent of the *śruti*: *what* to worship, *how* to worship, and *by what means*. It is not a domain where reason culminates in direct experience as in *jñāna*.

Classification and Function of Upāsanā

There are many types of *upāsanā*. Some yield visible (*dṛṣṭa*) results in this very life; others, invisible (*adṛṣṭa*) results, to be enjoyed in other realms after death—provided the practice is performed with faith and correctness. Some *upāsanās* produce both kinds of results. When the visible results are seen, they engender faith in the invisible results as well. Some contemplations are such that they prepare the aspirant for *kramamukti*—gradual liberation through ascending to a higher realm where Self-knowledge is eventually gained. All these types, when grounded in the Vedic statements that reveal experiential truths culminating in Self-knowledge, become trustworthy paths in the seeker's spiritual journey.

It must be understood that *upāsanā* has the practical benefit of cultivating *ekāgratā*—mental one-pointedness—and bestows both seen and unseen benefits when practiced in accordance with scriptural direction. Therefore, the *śruti* prescribes not only the worship of *Parameśvara* but also the worship of symbolic or subsidiary entities. When such worship is performed in the prescribed manner, respective results follow. However, in the context of Vedantic discussion, it is most fruitful to focus on *Brahma-upāsanās*—contemplation of *Brahman* as *Parameśvara*, the indwelling Self (*Ātman*), the ultimate reality.

From the standpoint of ultimate truth, every object is *Brahman*, *Parameśvara*, *Paramātman*. Hence, meditating upon any object as *Brahman* yields a higher result than meditating upon it as a non-self. This vision—where the world is not abandoned, but re-interpreted as the very presence of *Brahman* (from the viewpoint of Brahman, or through *brahma drsti)* —forms the distinctive contribution of *Vedānta-siddhānta*.

Varieties of Upāsanā and Their Eligibility

Upāsanās can be classified as follows:

- Karmāṅgopāsanā: Contemplations that are integrated into ritual actions.
- Pratīkopāsanā: Symbolic meditations using external forms or symbols.
- Īśvaropāsanā: Direct meditations upon the Supreme Lord.

As with external ritual actions (*karmas*), these *upāsanās* must be practiced in accordance with *śāstra*-prescribed qualifications. For instance, a *karmāṅgopāsanā* must be performed only by those qualified to perform the associated ritual. It is not obligatory to perform the *upāsanā* every time the ritual is done, but it cannot be performed independently without the ritual. For example, in *Udgīthopāsanā*, contemplating *Omkāra*, a component of the *Udgeetha*, as the supreme essence, is prescribed only for the *udgātṛ*—the ritual chanter performing the *Sāma Veda* chant.

Some *upāsanās*, such as those associated with the *Aśvamedha-yajña*, are open to members of the *trivarṇa* (the three upper castes) who are qualified by eligibility through Vedic study or ritual involvement. In such cases, even imagining oneself as the sacrificial horse (*ātmānaṃ aśvam iti upāsīta*) becomes a valid *upāsanā*.

In *pratīkopāsanā*, a symbol—whether space (*ākāśa*), mind (*manas*), or other element—is to be meditated upon as *Brahman*. Though one may intellectually know that the symbol is not ultimately *Brahman*, the *śruti* nonetheless enjoins meditation *as though* it were *Brahman* (that is, superimpose the superior properties of Brahman on the limited symbol). This is not due to delusion, but as a skilful means (*upāya*) for mental discipline and to remove mental limitations. While space is indeed non-different from *Brahman* from the ultimate standpoint, the meditation is not upon space as the Self, but rather space-as-symbol for *Brahman*. In all *upāsanā*, it is the Supreme Self—the Witness of all states and activities—who alone bestows the fruit of that *upāsanā*.

The Supremacy of Īśvaropāsanā and the Manner of Its Practice

Among all forms of *upāsanā*, the contemplation of *Īśvara* (God) stands out as the most exalted and desirable. In other forms of *upāsanā*, the aspirant engages in meditation to fulfill specific desires, and hence, many such *upāsanās* may be pursued in correspondence with the multiplicity of desires. But this is not so in the case of *Īśvaropāsanā*.

Though numerous *Īśvaropāsanās* are described in the scriptures, one must choose a single form and adhere to it with unwavering resolve. For in this path, *realization* is paramount. Here, the *upāsya*—the object of worship—is none other than *Īśvara*, who must

be contemplated with the sense of identity, the intellect saturated with the thought: “I am He.”

Although the fruit of *upāsanā* is formally obtained at its completion, it is essential to adopt the *ahaṃgraha-bhāva*—the sense that “I-am-He” —from the very outset. Just as a person appointed as the *tahsildar* (a local revenue officer) begins to feel “I am the tahsildar” from the moment the order is received—even though the full exercise of office may unfold later—so too must the aspirant in *ahaṃgrahopāsanā* begin with the conviction, “I am *Parameśvara* alone.”

Until all other identifications such as “I am this or that” are completely eradicated, and the one unshakable identity—“I am the Supreme”—is firmly established, *upāsanā* must be continued with single-pointed devotion. In every *upāsanā*, repetition of the meditative thought (*bhāvanā*) is essential; but in *ahaṃgrahopāsanā*, the thought must flow without interruption, until it transforms into direct realization (*sākṣātkāra*).

The Unbroken Stream of Thought

Let one not forget: in *upāsanā*, the current of thought must be unbroken, undistracted, and free from any sense of duality. Just as a person digging for water does not dig shallow pits in many places, but persists at one spot until the water is struck, so too must the aspirant persist in a single *upāsanā* until realization occurs. And even after realization, the practice should continue until the fall of the body, and till the results of meditation are achieved in the realm (*upāsya lōka)* of the meditation. As it is said, “Even after reaching the station, the ticket must be kept till the journey is over.”

Just as when we speak and someone listens, we know that something has been conveyed, likewise, when the feeling of *upāsanā* becomes strong and mature, one begins to see advance signs of the forthcoming result. Yet, the practice must not be abandoned. The discipline must continue until the *upāsaka* attains the *lōka* (realm) of the worshipped and experiences the promised fruit.

The Path of the Upāsaka at Death

The *Upaniṣads* declare that the *upāsaka* ascends to *Brahmaloka* via the *arcirādi-mārga*—the path of light. But to reach this path, the *upāsaka* must consciously cultivate the feeling of that path even at the time of death. In the *Gītā*, it is said that the thought held in the mind at the time of departure determines the path one takes after death.

Only those *upāsakas* who have developed deep and consistent *bhāvanā* of *Īśvara*—who have identified with Him throughout life—remember and ascend this path at the final moment. The *Upaniṣads* speak of hundreds of *nāḍīs* (subtle channels) emerging from the heart, and among them, the *suṣumṇā nāḍī*—which exits through the crown of the head—is the royal pathway to higher worlds. Only the one whose mind has become one-pointed through *upāsanā* and who rises through this channel at the moment of death can remember and follow this path.

Others, who have not cultivated this meditative vision, depart through other gates—each following the trajectory formed by their dominant mental impressions. As is one’s inner *bhāva*, so too is the path that unfolds.

The worshipper of *Brahman*, empowered by the strength of *upāsanā*, rises inwardly through the heart—guided by a subtle light—and, following the path beginning with *arci-s* (the path of light), is received stage by stage by the presiding deities. Ultimately, he reaches *Brahmaloka*. There, a divine being—not of human form (*amanavapuruṣa*)—ushers the *upāsaka* into *Brahmaloka*. In that world, the aspirant enjoys boundless joy and opulence, beyond human measure.

If the aspirant has performed *kramamukti upāsanā—upāsanā* that leads to gradual liberation—then, at the end of the cosmic cycle (*kalpa*), he, along with *Hiraṇyagarbha*, attains final knowledge and merges with *Parabrahman*. All this is described in the *Upaniṣads* as the path and result of *upāsanā*.

A Question on Verifiability: Do We Know This is True?

At this juncture, a question may arise: having undertaken to speak only of the universally accepted teachings of *Śaṅkarācārya*, is it appropriate to elaborate on such unseen matters? How can we verify where the *upāsaka* goes after death? Have those who authored such statements seen those other worlds and written from experience?

This concern is understandable. To address it, we must reflect on the nature of inner transformation and the creative power of human imagination.

It is well known and widely accepted that our mental dispositions and emotional states deeply influence our inner life, and that persistent feelings transform not only our personality but even the circumstances surrounding us. When our inner feeling becomes intense and unwavering, the outer world often seems to rearrange itself in resonance with that feeling. Those who have deeply contemplated and practiced this truth know it by experience.

Even in ordinary life, we place trust in the word of those who have seen and experienced. Do we not rely on the assurance of a travel company to undertake a pilgrimage to Kāśī? It is not our own experience, but we believe those who speak reliably of it.

Likewise, the *ṛṣis*, whose wisdom the *śruti* embodies, have not only spoken of the Supreme Truth (*tattva*) that is directly accessible to our own experience—such as in the statement *tat tvam asi*—but they have also taught the method and fruit of *upāsanā*. Can we say they revealed the first out of sincerity and invented the second to deceive?

If the same *śruti* that declares *tat tvam asi*—which does, in fact, become confirmed through direct realization—also instructs us to worship the Supreme Lord in a certain way, promising both realization here and liberation beyond, then why should that be doubted?

The Trustworthiness of Śruti and the Subtle Power of Bhāvanā

The fruits of *upāsanā*—such as inner transformation, peace, and steadfastness—are not merely promised in another world but are often seen and felt even here in this very life. If that is so, why should one hesitate to trust the *śruti* regarding the result that is said to occur after the body's fall?

Whether the post-mortem result manifests exactly as described or not, the essential point is this: the path laid down by the *śruti* transforms the aspirant now, in this very life, and

reveals the truth of the Self. The promise of *kramamukti* is not an empty assurance but the natural unfolding of a mind ripened by *upāsanā* and matured through unwavering contemplation of the Supreme.

Types of Worship and the Place of *Upāsana* in Contemporary Practice

Thus far, we have discussed the *upāsanas* mentioned in the *Upaniṣads*. However, these *upāsanas* are traditionally accessible only to those who have studied the *Vedas*, and in our time, few are qualified in that sense. But this should not lead anyone to despondency or resignation. The *Smṛti* affirms: "*itihāsa-purāṇābhyāṃ vedārthaṃ upabṛṃhayet*"—"The meaning of the *Vedas* is to be elucidated by the *Itihāsas* and *Purāṇas*." Holding firmly to the essential truths (*tattva*) of the Vedic *upāsanas*, the *Purāṇas* have expounded many contemplative methods accessible to a broader audience. These have been taught by compassionate *ṛṣis* for the benefit of seekers across time, and even today, many are uplifted by such methods.

Indeed, many *sādhus* have passed down practical methods of *upāsana* to their disciples, and their continued efficacy is living testimony to the fact that the *upāsana* traditions of Vedānta are grounded not only in scriptural authority but also in universal experience. This is a further confirmation of the *sāmpradāyika siddhānta* of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya.

Consider the example of one who sees a shining object from afar and imagines it to be a jewel. Motivated by this belief, he goes towards it and finds that it is indeed a jewel. Though his original perception was mistaken in its mode, the result was nonetheless fruitful because it corresponded with the underlying reality. Similarly, if one places faith in the *Parameśvara* revealed by scripture and the *ācāryas*, and worships Him with devotion, is it not reasonable to expect at least a corresponding benefit?

Faith and the Transformative Power of *Upāsana*

All human affairs rest upon trust in the words of reliable persons. Why, then, should scriptural action be held to a separate standard? Even today, people find deep inner transformation and circumstantial change through prayer, chanting the Lord's names (*nāma-japa*), and devotional singing (*bhajana*). Just as people place faith in doctors and are cured through prescribed medicine, so too have countless cases shown that *upāsana*—faithful contemplation of *Īśvara*—has healed where even medicine has failed.

In *kāmya-karmas*—actions performed with specific desires—faith is central. By vows, fasts, pilgrimages, and sacred observances, many have attained what they sought. Nevertheless, it is not particularly laudable to employ *upāsana* solely for trivial ends.

A Humorous Reflection

A fitting illustration was shared by my acquaintance Jīvana Dīkṣitar. Once, while in Nāśik, he and his younger brother were looking for a barber before performing a sacred bath. The hour was late, and they had no success. His brother, spotting a Ganeśa idol nearby, remarked, "Look, how beautiful this Ganeśa is!" Dīkṣitar retorted in frustration, "What use is Ganeśa? After worshipping Him all these years, we can't even find a barber here!" But lo—just then, two barbers appeared!

Later, Dīkṣitar told me this story with tears in his eyes and said, “Alas! What a fool I am! After years of worship, the result I earned was the arrival of two barbers!” The point is not to scoff at the blessing, but to recognize that *upāsana* is meant for more than worldly gain.

The Joy of Worship and the Nature of Liberation

The worship of *Parameśvara* is inherently uplifting. It purifies the mind, elevates the aspirant's qualifications, and prepares one for lasting happiness in this world and beyond. What room remains for doubt, then, that a life of bliss arises from the worship of the blissful *Īśvara*?

To appreciate this blissful nature, we must now turn to the *Upaniṣadic* characterization of *upāsana*-vacanas—the contemplative statements. The world, as we presently perceive it, is impermanent, impure, and sorrowful. But its true essence is Brahman—eternal, pure, luminous, free, and of the nature of bliss.

An Allegory for the Self's Freedom

Though this very Self is Brahman, we mistakenly consider ourselves bound—much like a wealthy man imagining himself to be a pauper. Though ever free, we struggle to attain liberation. Consider the story of a thief repeatedly imprisoned, who once managed to escape by outwitting the guards. When a friend asked, “Which gate was the hardest to escape from?” he answered, “The one that was open!”

That gate opened outward, but the prisoner had exhausted himself pulling it inward. Finally, dejected, he leaned back against it—and the door swung open by itself! The illusion was that the door was locked, when in truth it was not. Similarly, we are already free, but due to a mistaken sense of bondage, we labor in vain, seeking a liberation that need not be acquired.

All our efforts made in the fog of ignorance often deepen our entanglement. Like the thief, when we finally cease striving in the wrong way and fall back in surrender, the door of Truth opens—by the unseen grace born of past merits.

These are the Universally Accepted Teachings of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya

Worship as a Means and Its Role in Turning the Mind Inward

There is a noble path, a luminous path—the path of prescribed worship that turns our hearts toward the Supreme. When one worships the Supreme Being as *satya-kāma* (one whose desires are true), *satya-saṅkalpa* (one whose intentions are true), and so on, the *Upaniṣads* declare that specific results will follow. Even the fruits of prescribed ritual actions are granted by that very Supreme Lord. However, our minds habitually conjoin the act and its result, clinging to the notion that “if this is done, that will follow.” This action-result linkage persists in our thinking.

But in the sentences that teach worship (*upāsanā-vākyas*), especially those that enjoin the worship of the Supreme Lord alone, we find something more subtle. These statements prepare and elevate the mind to turn toward the Supreme Self. For example, "*tad-vanam ity upāsitavyam*" — “He is the most beloved; therefore, He should be worshipped.” These sentences serve not merely to promise results but to arouse love and remembrance of the Supreme Being. This is similarly found in the *Purāṇas* and *Hari-kīrtanas*, which

momentarily relieve many from worldly sorrow by immersing them in the Lord's glories. As this worship matures, we begin to feel its sweetness and naturally yearn, "May this joy remain forever!"

When Śrī Rāma departed for the forest, those enchanted by His virtues exclaimed, "We too shall go with Him! Enough of village life! We want Rāma a hundred times more than the world!" Just so, when the mind becomes deeply attuned to the virtues of the Supreme, we too are impelled toward the inward journey to the Self.

Worship as a Preparatory Means (*Sādhana*)

The *Upaniṣads* ultimately aim to dispel the illusion of worldliness and reveal the truth of the Self. Yet, worship-vākyas, which promise various fruits and turn the mind toward the Divine, serve as preliminary means to this highest end. From this perspective, it is appropriate to say that such *upāsanā-vākyas* function as intermediate steps.

Although they mention rewards and prescribe forms of worship, these sentences differ from those that reveal pure Self-knowledge (*jñāna*). The sentences of *upāsanā* describe Brahman in relation to limiting adjuncts (*upādhi*), pointing to a qualified form of Brahman. However, they are not entirely devoid of insight into the true nature of Brahman. Just as a traveler may find refreshments at intermediate stations while journeying toward his final destination, so too the fruits of *upāsanā* may arise before the attainment of Brahman—but they are not the ultimate fruit. Thus, one must carefully discern the intent and scope of the *Upaniṣadic* statements.

Divergent Interpretations of the *Upaniṣads*

Why do we face the persistent question: "How should the *Upaniṣads* be interpreted?" The reason is clear—different interpreters have drawn divergent conclusions from the same text. Some assert that the *Upaniṣads* primarily teach the worship of the Supreme Lord, while allowing space for other views consistent with that. Others claim the *Upaniṣads* chiefly proclaim Self-knowledge as the highest teaching, with all other instructions serving that aim. These two positions are mutually exclusive.

Moreover, among the worship-based interpreters and knowledge-based interpreters, subdivisions have formed, leading to ongoing debates and conflicting doctrines. As a result, unless the true meaning of the *Upaniṣads* is determined, the sincere seeker is left without a trustworthy foundation. In this context, we encounter two types of commentators: the System-Makers and the System-Finders.

System-Makers (*siddhānta nirmāpaka)* vs. System-Finders (*siddhānta darśi)*

The System-Makers do not patiently inquire into the intent of the *Upaniṣadic* sentences. Instead, they mold the sentence to align with their pre-established doctrine. Sometimes they even manufacture sentences or interpretations out of their imagination. For example, some claim: "The Supreme Lord must fulfill all desires; therefore, the world created by Him must be real. Thus, the *śāstra* declares the world to be true." This is not scriptural exegesis—it is dogma-driven interpretation.

This is akin to a humorous story. A few men, unable to find gainful employment, sat near a well and began bottling its water, labeling it "Mineral Water." On the label, they printed grand eulogies describing the supposed virtues of the water. The qualities attributed to the

water did not emerge from any real analysis, but from their desires. In the same way, System-Makers are not concerned with what the *Upaniṣads* actually teach; they are only concerned with fulfilling their imagined ideals. Their doctrine shapes the sentence—not the other way around.

There are many today who, before turning to the *Veda*, presume that every noble idea of the modern age must already be found therein. From this assumption, they devise clever strategies to extract their preconceived conclusions from the *Vedic* texts.

A Modern Example of System-Making

In Bengaluru, a scholar once tried to show that everything modern science is discovering was already foretold by the ancient sages. One day, he confidently proclaimed that even the difference between human and animal blood was described in the *Vedas*. A renowned doctor, present at the talk, mentioned this to a friend, who in turn conveyed it with respect to the Governor of Madras.

The Governor, impressed, included it in one of his public addresses. But this caught the attention of a British scientific society, which sent an inquiry asking, “What is the source of this claim?” Despite a thorough investigation, the Governor could not produce any *Vedic* reference and eventually had to apologize for the error.

This is the method of the System-Maker—assert without basis, reinterpret recklessly, and rely on faith not in *śruti*, but in one’s own desires.

System-Finders and the Proper Understanding of the Upaniṣads

The *system-finders* differ entirely from the *system-makers*. They undertake the task of uncovering what the *Upaniṣads* actually intend to teach, carefully examining the beginning, conclusion, and other interpretive indicators (*linga*s) of the text. Only after discerning that a particular teaching is found consistently across the *Upaniṣads*, and that it accords with universal experience, do they conclude: “This is the true import of the *Upaniṣads*.” Śrī Śaṅkarācārya stands in this noble tradition.

The *system-finders* do not project their preferences onto the texts, nor are they swayed merely by the popularity of an opinion. Their method is objective and rooted in the *śāstra* itself. The contrast between them and the *system-makers* is akin to that between an honest lawyer who argues a case based on sound evidence, and another who fabricates evidence to suit a foregone conclusion.

Let us now apply this approach to a particular *Upaniṣad*, namely the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. In its opening sections, various forms of *upāsanā* are presented. Can we, simply on this basis, conclude that this *Upaniṣad* teaches only *saguṇa Brahman* worship as its primary teaching?

In the *Śikṣāvalli*, we find mention of *saṁhitopāsanā*, *medhākāma*, and *śrīkāma upāsanās*. Later, the text presents the *upāsanā* of Brahman identified with the *vyāhṛtis*, followed by *padopāsanā* and *oṁkāropāsanā*. It also includes instructions that actions should be performed after *svādhyāya* (study of the Vedas), and contains the well-known concluding advice that the teacher gives the disciple. Judging only from these, one might conclude that this section is meant to teach *upāsanās* compatible with ritual actions (*karma*).

Indeed, Śaṅkarācārya himself interprets it thus. Even those who advocate that *upāsanā* is the ultimate purport of Vedānta admit that some unseen result is promised through the realization of *upāsanā*. This much is accepted by all *ācāryas*. Those qualified to study the Vedas and reflect on their meaning can undertake these *upāsanās*, attaining their fruition either in this world or the next. Thus, the worth of this section of the *Upaniṣad* must be gauged in this light. When the promised results of *upāsanā* are seen in experience, then, supported by the strength of *śraddhā* and trust in *śāstra*, one may confidently believe that the fruits promised after death too will follow.

Saguna Brahman and the Fruit of Upāsanā

This portion of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* presents a vivid description of *saguṇa Brahman* and the method of its *upāsanā*. Brahman is to be worshipped in the *hṛdayākāśa* (the space of the heart) as *puruṣa*, *pūrṇa* (complete), *manomaya* (of the nature of mind), *amṛta* (immortal), and *jyotirmaya* (luminous). The *upāsaka* who realizes this Brahman ascends through the *suṣumnā nāḍī* from the heart, and after attaining successively the deities Agni, Vāyu, and Āditya—forms of the *vyāhṛtis*—reaches *brahma-sāyujya* (identity with Brahman). The one who has attained that Brahman becomes the ruler over all the *indriyas* (senses) of all beings.

That Brahman is said to be all-pervading like the sky, both with form and formless (*mūrta-amūrta*), and of the very nature of truth (*satyātmakam*). Ever present in the senses, with a cheerful mind and full of peace—because of such characteristics—it is stated that the worshipper attains Brahman possessed of all these qualities. This conclusion is supported by two clear indicators: first, the sentence *iti prācīnayoga upāsti* ("Thus is the ancient method of *upāsanā*"), and second, the description of the *devayāna* (path of the gods), beginning with the *nāḍī*, progressing through Agni, Vāyu, and Āditya, and culminating in *brahma-sāyujya*.

Thus, it is evident that this section speaks of a particular fruit—Brahman realization at a particular time and in a particular place—as the result of *upāsanā*. The *upāsaka*, who initially sees himself as limited to the body, expands into a more universal form, and finally attains Brahman, the indweller of all senses. Such a progression is explicitly stated here, confirming that the intent of this portion is to teach *upāsanā*.

But Are All Statements of the Upaniṣads Upāsanā?

However, can we, based on this, claim that every sentence in the *Upaniṣads* is of the nature of *upāsanā*? To answer this, we must consider the next portion of the *Upaniṣad*. Let us now take up that investigation.

28. Jnanavakyas (sentences of wisdom) in the Upanishads

(26-8-53)

The Intention (*Tatparya*) of the Upaniṣads: Karma, Upāsanā, or Ātma-vastu?

A fundamental question arises: Do the *Upaniṣads* intend to teach *karma* (ritual action), *upāsanā* (meditation), or the direct realization of *ātma-vastu* (the nature of the Self)? To

answer this conclusively, it is necessary to carefully examine at least one *Upaniṣad* that incorporates all three elements. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* serves as a fitting representative for such a study.

We have already seen that the *Śikṣāvallī* of this *Upaniṣad* contains various *upāsanās*. No one can credibly argue that those passages are *vastu-pratipādaka-vākyas* (statements that reveal the nature of reality), for example: "Bhūḥ is Agni, Bhuvaḥ is Vāyu, Suvaḥ is Āditya." If these were meant as *vastu-jñāna-vākyas*, one would have to conclude that the words *bhūḥ*, *bhuvaḥ*, and *suvaḥ* themselves *are* fire, air, and sun, respectively—which clearly contradicts experience. Instead, such passages are to be understood as *upāsanā-vākyas*—injunctions to meditate in a particular manner. The sentence "Meditate thus" (*upāsitavyam iti*) explicitly confirms the intention (*tatparya*) of the *śruti* to prescribe meditation.

Similarly, injunctions such as "One should study," "One should teach," "One should speak the truth," and "One should perform *Agnihotra*" also appear in this section. However, Śaṅkarācārya clarifies that these are not stated with *tatparya* (primary intention) in this context. Rather, they are included to prevent the misunderstanding that *karma* is altogether fruitless simply because the fruit of *upāsanā* is described as *svārājya* (self-rule). Moreover, *karma* is presented here, according to Śaṅkara, as a means to purify the mind and prepare the aspirant for *jñāna*.

Thus, while the *karmakāṇḍa* (ritual section) of the *Veda* concerns itself solely with *karma*, the *Upaniṣads* or *Vedānta* sections also prescribe *upāsanā*. For instance, the *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad* clarifies that natural or worldly *karma*, arising from *laukika-jñāna* (ordinary knowledge), leads to bondage. But *śāstrīya-karma* (scriptural action) is prescribed to liberate one from such inauspicious results, ultimately purifying the aspirant and directing them toward *amṛtatva* (immortality)—that is, liberation attained through *brahmopāsanā*.

The *Veda* guides the aspirant in stages—through *kāmyakarma* (desire-based actions), *nityakarma* (regular duties), and *upāsanā*—towards the final vision of Brahman. Even verses such as, "One should not eat alone; share with others and eat, seeing it as *prasāda* (grace)," serve to refine one's mind and orient it toward the Supreme. The *Veda* is not concerned with the trivial gains incidentally mentioned in connection with these *karmas* or *upāsanās*, but with facilitating *adhikāritva* (eligibility) for Brahma-jñāna and eventually granting *parama-puruṣārtha* (the highest human goal). Just as *śāstrīya karma* is superior to *laukika karma* due to its purificatory effect, so too *upāsanā* is a more inward and refined practice than action, drawing one closer to Brahman. For this reason, *upāsanā* is given priority in the *Upaniṣads*.

But Is *Upāsanā* the Final Teaching?

Still, *upāsanā* is not the final word of the *Upaniṣads*. Earlier, we discussed the nature of the Brahman attained through *upāsanā* as described in the *Śikṣāvallī* of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. But consider now the *Brahmānandavallī*, which begins: "One who knows Brahman attains the highest. That Brahman is truth, knowledge, and infinite. It is hidden in the cave of the heart. One who knows that Brahman becomes all."

If the purpose of the *Upaniṣad* were fully served by teaching *upāsanā* and its fruit—i.e., union with Brahman—then the *Śikṣāvallī* would have sufficed. Why, then, would a fresh

teaching of Brahman appear in the *Brahmānandavallī*? Clearly, this is not repetition. There is a distinct difference in the portrayal of Brahman in the two sections.

The Brahman described in the *Śikṣāvallī* is endowed with attributes—*manomaya*, *amṛta*, *jyotirmaya*, etc.—and is to be attained later by passing through the *nāḍīs*. By contrast, the Brahman of the *Brahmānandavallī* is *nirviśeṣa* (attribute-less), *ananta* (infinite), *satyam jñānam anantam*—immediately present here and now in the cave of the heart. It is not to be reached later; it is to be known, as one's own Self.

Thus, it is clear that these two sections deal with fundamentally different subjects. The earlier speaks of meditative realization of *saguṇa Brahman*; the latter, of direct knowledge of *nirguṇa Brahman*. The final *tatparya* of the *Upaniṣad*, therefore, must lie in the realization of the *nirguṇa ātman*, and not merely in *upāsanā*. Let us now continue this inquiry further by examining the next section.

On the Nature of *Upāsanā* and the Apparent Creation

Upāsanā requires contemplating Brahman as possessing certain attributes. The scriptures state that the fruit of *upāsanā* is in accordance with the attributes meditated upon. But Brahman is *nirguṇa*—devoid of all attributes—so who could possibly worship it, and for what outcome? Consider the humorous story of the disciple of a supremely blissful *ācārya*, who went along with another student to seek a bride. When the bride's family inquired, "What are the groom's possessions?", he replied, "The coat he's wearing—it's mine!" Who would accept as a son-in-law someone who does not even possess his own clothes? Similarly, it is meaningless for a *upāsaka* to meditate on a quality-less *Īśvara*. The very structure of *upāsanā* presupposes an object that possesses definable attributes.

In the *Brahmānandavallī*, however, the nature of the Supreme Being is described through negation: "This Brahman is invisible, incorporeal, ungraspable, without lineage or association..." The Upaniṣad thus affirms the nature of Brahman by denying all attributes and limitations. Nowhere is it said that Brahman possesses qualities that can serve as a basis for *upāsanā*. How then can these passages be considered *upāsanā-vākyas*?

Furthermore, from another angle: in the *Śikṣāvallī*, the injunctions to meditate—*upāsitavyam*—are explicit. But no such command occurs in the *Brahmānandavallī*. While it does state that one who knows Brahman attains all desires, there is no indication that such knowledge refers to *upāsanā*. Rather, the section begins with a cosmogonic account: "From that Brahman who is the Self, space was born; from space, air; from air, fire..." In *upāsanā*, the fruit is gained only after attaining Brahman. But here, Brahman is not something to be attained later—it is declared to be our very *ātman* from the outset. How can one who has known their identity with Brahman still perform *upāsanā* for a result? The statement about space originating from Brahman must be understood as a way to indicate that *ātman* is none other than the infinite Brahman.

Some may object: If this *śruti* merely intends to explain the infinite Brahman, why speak of space and other elements arising from it? Doesn't this indicate that Brahman is the creator of the world, and thus *saguṇa* (qualified) and distinct from the world? The answer is that the purpose of such *śruti* passages is not to convey a factual genesis of space and other elements from Brahman, nor is there any benefit in knowing such causation. No *śruti* passage about creation declares that one who knows that space arises from Brahman will

thereby attain liberation. Should we still assume that such knowledge yields a fruit, even if unspoken?

That too is not justified. If one were to perform *upāsanā* believing that Brahman has *truly* become space and the elements, they would, in effect, associate themselves with change and decay—fruits no one desires. Then what meaning should be ascribed to the phrase "From Brahman, space was born"?

Just as the statement "Devadatta became a tiger" means that he appeared as a tiger—not that he was truly transformed—so too, the world is to be seen as an appearance of Brahman. This understanding bears fruit: it leads to the realization that the entire universe is but a manifestation of the non-dual, infinite Brahman, and that Brahman is none other than one's own Self. This insight establishes the seeker in abiding peace and fulfillment.

Still, one may raise another objection: The *śruti* says space and the rest were born from Brahman, using the past tense. The world is perceived as distinct and real through the means of valid knowledge—perception, inference, and so on. How, then, can it be said that the world is merely an appearance? Could not the *śruti* have explicitly said so? Why should we not interpret such creation statements in their primary, literal sense?

The solution lies in understanding the language of the Upaniṣads. The statement "space was born from Brahman" should not be interpreted as a literal transformation. Rather, it means that Brahman *appears* as space and other elements. Brahman does not create the world like a carpenter fashions furniture. There is no external instrument or auxiliary material. Since the verb *saṃbhūtaḥ* (born) is used, the grammatical rule dictates the use of the ablative case (pañcamī vibhakti) to indicate the material cause: *ātmanaḥ*—from the Self. This indicates that Brahman is the *upādāna-kāraṇa* (material cause) of the world.

Yet, if Brahman has truly become the world, then—like any transformation—the cause would be diminished when the effect arises. But *śruti* clearly states that Brahman is *pūrṇa*—complete—both before and after the appearance of the world. Hence, even though the world arises from Brahman and merges back into it, Brahman remains unaffected—neither increased nor diminished.

In *suṣupti* (deep sleep), when the world is not perceived, and in *jāgrat* (waking), when the world appears—there is no experiential difference in the fullness of *ātman*. Therefore, though Brahman is said to be the cause of the world, it is not transformed by creation. The doctrine here is *vivarta-vāda*—apparent transformation. The world is a superimposed appearance on Brahman, which remains ever complete, unchanging, and self-effulgent.

On the Use of Past Tense in *Śruti* and the True Import of Creation Statements

Given that Brahman appears as the world of space, time, and name-form, it is both logical and consistent with experience to interpret the statement "Brahman became the world" in the same way one would interpret the statement, "Devadatta has become a tiger"—namely, that it is an appearance and not a literal transformation. Thus, it is established that this is the correct import (*tātparya*) of the *śruti*.

Even though we encounter *śruti* passages that state, "Space was born from Brahman," or "Time was born from Brahman," it must still be understood that Brahman alone is appearing as both space and time. There is an additional reason why it is illogical to interpret such passages as suggesting that Brahman *actually* transformed into space and

time: the very notion of space or time being *born* is incoherent. For anything to be said to be born, it must be born *somewhere* and *at some time*. But how could space be born in another space? Or time be born in another time? That would be as absurd as saying, “Because his head was infested with lice, a man chopped it off, set it on his thigh, and watched the lice crawl around.” The absurdity of such a statement is obvious—and so too is the absurdity of asserting the origination of space and time from a spatial or temporal basis.

This difficulty vanishes when we accept the interpretation offered by the Advaitic tradition: that *śruti* speaks of creation, sustenance, and dissolution only as a method for leading the seeker toward non-dual knowledge. The waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states are examined not because the *śruti* aims to prove their reality, but in order to reveal the ever-present Self as their witness. From this standpoint, nothing truly arises apart from the Self, and nothing truly dissolves either—all appearances rest in, and are not separate from, the non-dual Self.

Because the Self is beyond the limitations of space, time, and objecthood, it is infinite. The declarations of *śruti*—such as “unseen,” “bodiless,” “indescribable,” “without support” (*adṛśyaḥ, anātmē, aniruktaḥ, anilayānaḥ*)—clearly negate all attributes and distinctions. The teaching that the world is a superimposition (*adhyāsa*) upon the Self, dependent upon ignorance and resolved through knowledge, aligns fully with our experience. This is why the traditional dictum holds: “The non-dual Brahman is taught through superimposition and subsequent negation” (*adhyāropāpavādābhyāṁ niṣprapañco brahma vistāryate*). Just as a cloth remains the same whether folded or unfolded, so too Brahman remains the non-dual reality, whether the world appears or not.

Moreover, *śruti* explicitly states the result of *Brahma-vidyā* (knowledge of Brahman), but not of creation, preservation, or dissolution. According to the Mimāṁsā principle that a passage whose result is not specified is subordinate to one whose result is, the creation statements serve a secondary, illustrative purpose. Their function is to lead the seeker toward the understanding of the Self. Thus, it is determined that the *śruti* speaks of creation only as an *upāya* (means) for attaining Brahma-jñāna.

Still, a question may be raised: what, then, is the meaning of *śruti* passages like “From Brahman, space came into being”? If nothing was ever truly created, what is the utility of describing it as having been created in the past?

To this, we answer: for seekers who are immersed in the dualistic world of direct perception, to be told abruptly that “All this is Brahman” might appear as a contradiction of their experience. Therefore, *śruti*, like a compassionate mother, adopts the method of storytelling. It speaks as if Brahman were the source from which all diversity arises, and gradually reveals that all of it is none other than the Self. By presenting the diversity as having arisen from Brahman, *śruti* allows the seeker to turn inward and recognize, through the discrimination of the five sheaths (*pañca-kośa-viveka*), that their innermost Self is that very Brahman.

The narrative style of *śruti* is akin to the stories told to children. A mother begins, “In a village there lived a girl,” describes the girl’s nature, and by the end the child says, “Wait, was that me you were talking about?” Similarly, *śruti* begins: “All this was Brahman alone. That Brahman created the world and entered into it.” And the discriminating seeker, hearing this, is moved to declare, “Ah! *śruti* is telling *my* story—I am Brahman indeed!”

Therefore, the use of the past tense in such *śruti* passages is merely an instructional device. It is not meant to indicate any literal or temporal event of creation. Rather, it is a method for guiding the seeker from the apparent reality of duality to the direct recognition of non-dual Brahman, which is none other than the Self.

The Ramayana as a Mirror of Vedantic Truth

We can illustrate this method of teaching with an example from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Valmiki, who composed the epic poem with Śrī Rāma as the hero, includes a profound Vedantic moment during the episode of Sītā's fire ordeal. When Sītā enters the fire and Rāma appears sorrowful, Brahmā and the other gods descend and say to him:
"O sustainer of the universe, O knower of all, O foremost among the wise! How can you, who are the very Self of all, fail to recognize Sītā, who has entered the fire? O best among the gods, how is it that you do not recognize your own true nature?"

In response, Rāma asks, "Then who am I in reality? Am I not a human being? Am I not the son of Daśaratha?"

To this, Brahmā—described by Valmiki as the four-faced Lord—declares in various ways that Rāma is none other than the Supreme Self, the inner Self of all beings.

This episode is not a mere poetic flourish. It encapsulates the very core of *Vedānta*. Each one of us is, in truth, the Supreme Self (*Paramātman*). Yet, due to ignorance (*avidyā*), we mistakenly take ourselves to be limited, worldly individuals. This misunderstanding gives rise to all sorrow and delusion. A maidservant, even after being made queen, may still secretly approach the pillars of her old home and beg, "Please give me food!" out of habit and forgetfulness. In the same way, though we are truly Brahman—the very Self, full and complete—we go on begging for fulfillment in transient things and suffer for it.

Just as Brahmā reminded Rāma of his true nature, if a compassionate teacher were to come and declare to us, "Dear one, you are truly Brahman. Come to know it by deep inquiry," then we too could realize our ever-attained Brahmanhood. Thus, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is far more than an epic tale—it is a spiritual mirror, gently reminding us again and again of the ultimate truth. It follows the method of *śruti* itself.

For instance, the *śruti* says:
"There was only Brahman in the beginning. It created the world, beginning with space, and entered into it as the living being (*jīva*). O living being, you are That!"
—so it teaches the truth through the mode of story and parable.

Stories and Statements: Means of Contemplation

Therefore, do not dismiss such passages as mere stories. What I have offered here is a method of contemplation—how to understand whether a particular *śruti* statement is meant as a sentence of worship (*upāsanā-vākya*) or a sentence of knowledge (*jñāna-vākya*). Even in science, if someone says, "Oxygen and hydrogen, out of mutual affection, came together and gave birth to water," no one takes it as just a fanciful tale. We understand the scientific truth behind the poetic expression.

In the same way, even when clothed in the garb of a narrative, the *śruti* teaches the profoundest truths—truths rooted in universal human experience. By grasping these

teachings with the right vision, we move steadily toward the supreme goal of human life—*parama-puruṣārtha*, liberation itself.

29. The *Upasya Rupa* (Form for Worship) and the *Paramartha Svarupa* (Ultimate Nature) of Brahman

(27-8-53)

Worship and Knowledge in the Upanishads

Many Upaniṣads present a layered structure: sections describing *upāsanā* (meditative worship), followed by teachings on *jñāna* (knowledge), and sometimes a return to the topic of *upāsanā*. This arrangement has led some to mistakenly assume that the primary purport (*tātparya*) of the Upaniṣads lies in *upāsanā* alone. However, a closer analysis reveals that the sentences on *upāsanā* speak of Brahman as associated with limiting adjuncts (*upādhi*), while those on *jñāna* reveal Brahman in its true, absolute nature—free of all limitations.

In *upāsanā*, the result corresponds to the particular attribute (*guṇa*) meditated upon. But the result of Brahman-knowledge (*brahma-jñāna*) is *mokṣa*—liberation, the highest goal. *Upāsanā* permits the aspirant to select a desired form (*rūpa*) to contemplate, but *jñāna* requires recognition of Brahman as it truly is. *Upāsanā* is a mental action (*mānasa-vyāpāra*), dependent on the individual (*puruṣa-tantra*), whereas *jñāna* is dependent solely on the nature of the object (*vastu-tantra*). For this reason, there is an essential hierarchy (*tāratamya*) between *upāsanā* and *jñāna*. Recognizing this distinction is crucial to avoid confusion about the true purport of the Upaniṣads.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya bases his conclusions on the *śruti* itself, which clearly and accessibly explains the difference between knowledge and worship. The *Kena Upaniṣad* (1.5–6) states:

> *yad vācānabhyuditaṃ yena vāg abhyudyate*
> *tad eva brahma tvaṃ viddhi nedaṃ yad idam upāsate ||*
>
> *yan manasā na manute yenāhur mano matam*
> *tad eva brahma tvaṃ viddhi nedaṃ yad idam upāsate ||*

"That which speech cannot reveal, but which enables speech to function—know that alone to be Brahman, not this which is worshipped as such.
That which the mind cannot conceive, but by which the mind is known—know that alone to be Brahman, not this which is worshipped as such."

The repetition in these verses emphasizes a crucial philosophical distinction. Some, misunderstanding this, imagine that two different Brahmans are being referred to—one to be known, another to be worshipped. But this is not the case. The *same* Brahman is spoken of in two distinct modes: as the worshipped and the known. The difference lies in the presence or absence of *upādhi*.

Śaṅkarācārya clarifies this in the *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* (4.4.14):

yā vidyā-kṛta-nāma-rūpādi-viśeṣa-pratiṣedhād alādi-śabdaḥ brahma upadiśyate, tat param;
tadeva yatra nāma-rūpādi-viśeṣeṇa kenacid viśiṣṭam upāsanāyām upadiśyate, tad-aparam.

Where Brahman is taught through words that negate names and forms projected by ignorance, that is the *para-brahman*—the Supreme Brahman. But where the same Brahman is described with attributes like “consisting of mind” (*manomayaḥ*), “having prāṇa as body” (*prāṇaśarīraḥ*) for the purpose of worship, that is the *apara-brahman*—the lower, worshipable Brahman.

Similarly, in *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* (1.1.12), he states:

evaṃ ekam api brahma apekṣita-upādhi-sambandhaṃ nirasta-upādhi-sambandhaṃ ca upāsyatvena jñeyatvena ca vedānteṣu upadiśyate.

Thus, the same Brahman is taught in the *Vedānta* as either to be worshipped or to be known, depending on whether it is associated with limiting adjuncts or not.

One might ask: if what is worshipped is not Brahman, why does the *śruti* say so? The answer is that the *śruti* does not deny the *worshipable Brahman* outright—it only denies that such a form is Brahman's true nature. Just as we must remove clothing to know the true weight of a person, the superimposed forms and attributes used in worship must be set aside to realize Brahman's essential nature.

The Form of Brahman and the Nature of Worship

What, then, is the true form of Brahman that is to be known? For the sake of bestowing grace upon devotees, the Supreme Lord assumes forms according to the devotee's own disposition. Yet, it would be incorrect to conclude that such forms alone constitute His essential nature. The ācāryas have taught: *“syāt parameśvarasyāpi icchāvaśān māyāmayaṃ rūpaṃ sādhakānugrahārtham”*—Even the Supreme Lord may assume a form composed of māyā, out of His own will, for the purpose of blessing the sādhaka.

When Śrīman Nārāyaṇa revealed His cosmic form (*viśvarūpa*) to Nārada, He explicitly stated: “Nārada, do not think that this form you now see is My real form—for all this is māyā.” Thus, the Lord takes on various forms in accordance with the worship of the devotee.

In earlier times, during village festivals, each household would shape a Vināyaka idol from the same mud gathered from a lake. Though the substance was identical, each form reflected the intention and imagination of its maker. Likewise, the Lord takes on the form necessary to confer grace, yet it would be erroneous to insist that any one such form is final or definitive. Each devotee may have a particular affection for a specific form or avatāra, but none has the right to invalidate another’s way of worship. If Parameśvara lacked the freedom to assume countless forms, how could He be Parameśvara at all?

Even when retaining a fixed form, devotees often adorn the image with garments and ornaments according to their own sentiments. In one village, a great debate arose: should the nāma be placed as for Rāma, or a tilaka? But the Lord surely accepts whatever is

offered with sincere devotion. Yet, it must be understood that forms and attributes do not pertain to the true nature of the Supreme Being; rather, statements that ascribe form to Brahman are primarily intended to guide *upāsanā*, whereas statements that negate all difference point toward Brahman's essential nature.

Reconciling these two kinds of *śruti*-statements, the ācāryas have declared:

> *"upāsanāvidhi-pradhānāni hi tāni; teṣu asati virodhe yathāśrutam āśrayitavyam, sati tu virodhe tat-pradhānāni atat-pradhāneyo balīyāṃsi bhavanti."*

That is, statements pertaining to *upāsanā* are predominantly instructional in nature. In the absence of contradiction, one may accept them as they are. But when a contradiction arises between statements regarding the essence (*vastu*) and statements prescribing worship, the former—being concerned with the essential reality—take precedence. In other words, *sākāra-saguṇa* (with form and qualities) statements relate to the method of worship, not to Brahman's intrinsic nature. Thus, where details in *upāsanā*-statements are non-contradictory, they may be followed as prescribed. But where they conflict with the higher truth of Brahman's nature, one must accept the *vastu-pradhāna* statements—those revealing Brahman's essential, attributeless reality.

The teachings concerning Brahman's essential nature—its *paramārtha-svarūpa*—are found in Upaniṣadic sections such as the *Brahmavalli*. There, Brahman is revealed as formless and without attributes. Since Brahman is none other than our own Self, and since distinctions are only perceived in the non-self, the nature of the Self must be understood to be without distinction. This is also affirmed by *śruti*, which carefully negates all conceptual divisions: unseen, bodiless, indescribable, without support (*adṛśye'nātmani anirukte'nilayane).* Such teachings are wholly consistent with the view of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, and agreeable to all who inquire based on reason (*yukti*) and lived experience (*anubhava*).

Even so, Śaṅkara's doctrine is spacious and inclusive—it accommodates the faith of those who prefer form. As Mahatma Gandhi once said to a political adversary who claimed, "Either you must leave the field or I must," Gandhiji replied, "Not at all. India is vast enough for both of us." Similarly, the Lord, who took the form of Matsya to protect the world, pervades the entire universe. There is room for all types of worshippers within His boundless being. Since the entire world is projected upon the Supreme Reality, whatever form or attribute a worshipper envisions is encompassed within that very Reality. There is no second entity apart from the Supreme; hence, there is no ground for dispute.

Nevertheless, people often form sects and quarrel over the right form of worship. But true knowers of Brahman are compassionate toward all, recognizing that all religions, in essence, express the same devotion to the One Lord. Nowadays, we see even social and political tendencies leading to the formation of exclusive Brahmin associations. Whether such groupings serve a legitimate social need is debatable. But from the standpoint of Vedānta, true *brāhmaṇas* are *brahma-jñānins*—knowers of Brahman. And *śruti* declares: *"brahmavit brahmaiva bhavati"*—The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman. Who, then, can a *brāhmaṇa* exclude from his association, when Brahman is the Self of all?

This is the noble message of the Vedāntins. This is the inclusive, liberating teaching of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya. Let us all gather beneath the broad canopy of this teaching and, united in spirit, strive toward *puruṣārtha*—the true aim of human life.

30. Sutra Prasthana (Topic of the Aphorisms)

(28-8-53)

The Living Voice of the Upanishads

Until now, our inquiry has rested primarily upon the Upanishads, the very heart of Vedānta. The Upanishads are like music: even without formal knowledge of musical theory, one is transported by the *rāga-ālāpana* (melodic improvisation) of an accomplished vocalist. The experience transcends both singing and listening—it becomes a direct taste of aesthetic bliss. Likewise, for those well-versed in Sanskrit, listening to the cadence and depth of the Upanishads evokes profound joy. Even those without such linguistic training are often struck by their inner resonance, for their vision echoes universal experience.

Some claim that the Upanishads are *pauruṣeya*—texts composed by human authors. But we need not entangle ourselves in questions of authorship. The *ṛṣis* who gave voice to these texts did not begin with personal introductions or assert their own authority. Rather, like those who report what lies plainly before their eyes, they declared with clarity: “Brahman is the Self, the Self of all; It is of the nature of truth, knowledge, and bliss (*satyajñānānandarūpa*).” Their words, born of direct experience (*aparokṣānubhava*), captivate the mind and uplift the heart. Because their utterances accord with direct experience, they require no other proof.

The age in which the *ṛṣis* lived was one of robust *adhikāra*—a time when those qualified to study and live the Veda were plentiful. Their voices entered the ears of men and stirred their hearts with joy. None asked, “Who uttered this sentence?” It was enough that it was in harmony with experience. Today, the compositions of Purandara Dāsa are sung and cherished by all—regardless of whether one is a Mādhva or a Smārta—because the *nīti* (ethics) and *bhakti* (devotion) embedded in them transcend sectarian divisions. Similarly, the utterances of the *ṛṣis* were needed by all, cutting across boundaries of thought and tradition.

At that time, *yajñas* were being performed across many sacred spaces, and deities were worshipped with great faith and devotion. When the oblation was offered with the mantra "*indrāya svāhā*", it was believed that Indra truly received it. Such was the depth of conviction—that visible blessings from the deities confirmed the assurance of invisible ones.

But over time, such belief began to wane. Even within early Vedic literature, such as Yāska’s *Nirukta*, doubts began to surface: “Is *Parjanya* a conscious deity or merely the rain-bearing cloud?” The *Mīmāṃsakas*, like Śabarasvāmin, held that the deities were not conscious entities with forms who partook of oblations. Rather, it was the ritual itself, performed precisely according to scriptural injunction, that yielded the result—*karma* being its own cause. They went so far as to argue that *ātmajñāna* is the consideration of the *kartā* (agent), while *brahmajñāna* is the contemplation of the *devatā* (deity) associated with the ritual.

In such a climate, the need arose to discern the true *tatparya*—the central intention or purport—of the Upanishads. The *Brahmasūtras* fulfilled this critical function, offering a rigorous framework to extract the essential vision from the varied expressions of the *śruti*.

This phenomenon is not confined to Sanskrit texts alone. Even in regional languages, the capacity of sacred literature to move and influence the heart diminishes over time. Once, a singer named Dombidāsa in a small village sang a *lāvaṇi* called "Ballariya Lāvani," describing the heart-wrenching tale of a child in Ballari who was kidnapped for the sake of jewelry and had its hands cruelly severed. With tears in his eyes and a tambūrī in his hand, he sang with such emotion that the villagers listening wept, as though the incident had just taken place. One can only imagine the kind of impact the ballad had on the hearts of those who heard it soon after the actual event.

If such a description—recounted by a skilled singer—can stir such intense emotion in the listener, then how much more profound must have been the impact on *mumukṣus* (seekers of liberation) when enlightened *ṛṣis*, speaking from direct realization, spoke of the Lord who is none other than our very Self, and did so with clarity, sweetness, and grace!

But as time passed, the Vedas became ancient texts, the performance of the *karmas* they prescribed declined, and doubts began to emerge: “How should one perform which *karma*?” “Who can retain such an immense body of Vedic knowledge?” And with the rise of such difficulties, even the Upanishads began to seem like antiquated literature. Each Upanishad appears to approach the subject in a different way. How are we to reconcile them? What exactly is *brahmajñāna*? What is the nature of *mokṣa*, and what are the means to attain it?

Such questions naturally arose in the hearts of earnest *jijñāsus*—those who sought to know.

The Role of the Brahmasūtras and the Challenge of Interpretation

In this context, it was Vyāsa—also known as Bādarāyaṇa—who, after dividing the Vedas into their respective sections—*Saṃhitā*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka*—composed a systematic treatise in *sūtra* form to determine the meaning of Vedānta and illumine the sincere seeker. This text begins with aphorisms like *athāto brahmajijñāsā* ("Now, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman") and *janmādyasya yataḥ* ("[Brahman is] that from which the origin, etc., of the universe proceeds"). While this work is now universally known as the *Brahmasūtras*, its original titles—found in Śaṅkarācārya’s commentary—are *Śārīraka-mīmāṃsā* and *Vedānta-mīmāṃsā*.

Śārīraka-mīmāṃsā refers to the investigation (*mīmāṃsā*) into the nature of the *śārīrin*—the Self (*Ātman*) that appears, as it were, embodied in the individual (*jīva*). Since this investigation must be grounded in the Upaniṣads, it is also called *Vedānta-mīmāṃsā*. The term *mīmāṃsā* signifies a reverential inquiry—a deep and disciplined investigation. And because this inquiry culminates in the recognition that the Self is of the very nature of Brahman, the name *Brahmasūtra* became widely accepted for the aphorisms composing this text. Eventually, the entire book came to be referred to by this name.

Bādarāyaṇa, the composer of these *sūtras*, assimilated the teachings of the principal Upaniṣads and distilled their essential purport into these concise aphorisms for the benefit of his disciples. This was intended to preserve and transmit the wisdom of the Upaniṣads in a form that could be remembered and meditated upon. While this was a great help to

the sincere seekers of knowledge, over time it also posed a difficulty: as the influence of Kali Yuga deepened, fewer and fewer individuals tested the meaning of the Upaniṣads against the touchstone of their own experience. And as experiential insight waned, so too did the ability to grasp the meaning of these *sūtras*. We have now reached a point where the first *sūtras* of the *Mīmāṃsā* texts—*athāto dharmajijñāsā* and *athāto brahmajijñāsā*—are recited merely as ritual during *brahmayajña*, devoid of any living inquiry.

The reverence we offer today to these *mantras* often resembles the nostalgia one feels for an ancestral home long abandoned. Instead of tuning our minds to the minds of the *ṛṣis* to discover the living truths embedded in the Upaniṣads, we now say, “So-and-so Westerner has translated it like this in English.” This has led to a different kind of confusion: “Whose interpretation of the *Brahmasūtras* is correct?” Currently, there are ten or thirteen main commentaries on the *Brahmasūtras*, including that of Śaṅkarācārya. Some even say, based on the opinion of the Western scholar Thibaut, that Rāmānuja’s interpretation is closer to the literal meaning than Śaṅkara’s. And this opinion circulates among those who have never read a single original Sanskrit *bhāṣya*!

Meanwhile, the number of people who simply abandon Vedānta altogether is increasing. In such a situation, how can we truly understand the meaning of Bādarāyaṇa’s *sūtras*? Even if these ancient commentaries are translated into our regional languages, how can we discern which one reveals the truth? It is like the modern student who, rather than reading the textbook, reads a second-hand summary of it—what are called “notes.” In the same way, people today have set aside the Upaniṣads, the *sūtras*, and even the commentaries, and now rely solely on simplified paraphrases of someone else’s interpretation of Vedānta!

Accepting such superficial summaries as *Vedānta* is akin to buying a counterfeit book simply because it is cheap. Those who seek *puruṣārtha*—the true aims of life—must reflect carefully on this.

If one must begin somewhere, then let it be with Śaṅkarācārya’s *bhāṣya*, because he boldly asserts that the meaning of the Upaniṣads is not merely theoretical but can be directly experienced here and now. Imagine two doctors offering medicine—one says, “This will take twenty-five years to show results,” while the other says, “This will bring relief by tomorrow.” Which medicine would we try first? Certainly the second. Similarly, it is reasonable to give due consideration to Śaṅkara’s method, since he declares that Vedānta is verifiable through direct experience.

And importantly, Śaṅkara does not ask for blind belief. He invites seekers to examine whether his path is grounded in experience. If others also claim that their approach leads to realization, it must be tested in the same way. After all, it cannot be true that two opposing processes both reveal the same ultimate truth

Shankara's Experiential Method and the Purpose of the Brahmasūtras

Apart from Śaṅkarācārya, most other ācāryas maintain that the full result of their respective systems is not available here and now. According to them, *mukti* (liberation) is something that is fully realized only in another realm, post-death. In contrast, Śaṅkarācārya teaches that the Upaniṣads present a *siddhānta* (definitive doctrine) that can be verified here itself—by turning to one's own immediate experience. If this standpoint is confirmed, then belief in the efficacy of *upāsanā* (meditative worship) yielding

otherworldly results gains a proper foundation. Therefore, it is fitting that this method, which validates the authority of all the Vedas through experiential reasoning, be examined first.

According to Śaṅkarācārya, Vedānta is not to be accepted on mere faith. In his renowned introduction to the *Brahmasūtras*, the *Adhyāsa Bhāṣya*, he writes:

> *asyānarthahetoḥ prahāṇāya ātmāikatvavidyāpratipattaye sarve vedāntā ārabhyante | yathā cāyamarthaḥ sarveṣāṃ vedāntānāṃ, tathā vayamasyāṃ śārīrakamīmāṃsāyāṃ pradarśayiṣyāmaḥ* |

"All the Vedāntas are begun for the removal of this fundamental error—the mutual superimposition of Self and non-self—in order to realize the true knowledge of the identity of the Self. We shall now demonstrate how this is indeed the purport of all Vedānta in this Śārīraka-mīmāṃsā (Brahmasūtra commentary)."

This, says Śaṅkara, is the purpose of all Upaniṣadic inquiry. It is not a system resting on dogma or sectarian belief, but one grounded in self-verifying experience. Can the nature of the Self be determined by majority opinion? Surely not. The truth must be that which remains valid for all upon due examination. Hence, Vedānta must be shown to harmonize with universal human experience, and it is this task that Śaṅkara undertakes without bias in his commentary.

And yet, some have casually dismissed Śaṅkarācārya as a *māyāvādin*—a crypto-Buddhist—seeking to deter sincere seekers from engaging with his teaching. But the true lover of truth should not be dissuaded by such labels. The time for blind prejudice has passed. In today's world, what matters is not who says something, but whether what is said resonates with experience. Just as one who has tasted sugar will not be swayed by another’s denial of its sweetness, so too, once a glimpse of truth is gained, one need not abandon it out of fear or hearsay.

This naturally raises the question: how did the *Prasthāna*, the canonical foundation of Vedānta in the form of the *Brahmasūtras*, come to be?

As already discussed, the *tattva* (truth) of Brahman is taught in the Upaniṣads. The *ṛṣis* who uttered the Upaniṣadic statements did not compose them as poets create verses. These were utterances born from direct realization of the Supreme. For those of inwardly awakened minds, merely hearing these statements is sufficient for the truth to shine forth. There is no need to explain something as self-evident as fire to one who is already feeling the heat. Similarly, *brahma-tattva*, which is the essence of our own Self, need not be explained to one who has turned within and directly experienced it.

However, for those who are *bahirmukha*—outward-turned in their attention—the meaning of the Upaniṣads becomes obscure. Like someone unable to enter their own house because they have misplaced the key, such people require explanation. They cannot simply accept that “You are Brahman” without a clear and reasoned process. Their intellect seeks clarity, and they are not easily persuaded by mere assertion—especially when conflicting spiritual paths claim to lead to *mokṣa*. Therefore, a systematic clarification of the Upaniṣads became necessary for such aspirants.

Where others resorted to mere logic and dialectics, Bādarāyaṇa composed the *Vedānta Sūtras* to demonstrate that the meaning taught by the Upaniṣads is not only consistent

with experience but also intellectually rigorous and free from contradiction. He taught these *sūtras* to his disciples in order to uphold the authority of the *Vedānta-vākyas* and preserve the clarity of their purport.

The *Brahmasūtras* are divided into four chapters:

1. **Samanvaya Adhyāya** – The Chapter of Harmonization: This chapter establishes that *Brahman* is the central subject of all the Upaniṣads, and that *mokṣa* is attained through the knowledge of Brahman. It also reconciles various Upaniṣadic texts and includes some *upāsanā* sections to show that even meditative worship ultimately points to Brahman alone as the cause of the world.

2. **Avirodha Adhyāya** – The Chapter of Non-Contradiction: Here, opposing doctrines and conflicting interpretations—whether from *Smṛtis*, *tarkikas* (logicians), or rival schools—are refuted. It is shown that the non-dual Brahman doctrine faces no contradiction and alone reveals the unassailable truth.

3. **Sādhana Adhyāya** – The Chapter on Means: This chapter outlines the practical methods—*upāsanās* and qualifications—that prepare the seeker for *Brahma-jñāna*. It addresses gradational *sādhanas* suitable for aspirants of different temperaments.

4. **Phala Adhyāya** – The Chapter on the Fruit: The final chapter describes the result of Brahman-knowledge—*mokṣa*—and the nature of liberation, affirming that it is the complete cessation of all sorrow and the realization of the Self's eternal fullness.

Thus, the *Brahmasūtras*, also known as *Śārīraka Mīmāṃsā*, serve as a guiding light to unify the teachings of the Upaniṣads and to reveal the essential truth that *Brahman* is none other than our own innermost Self.

The Qualifications for Vedāntic Inquiry

The *Sūtra-prasthāna*—the Brahmasūtras—serve as a rigorous framework for determining the purport (*tatparya*) of Vedāntic sentences through refined reasoning. Though translations and commentaries, including those in Kannada, are now available, this alone is not sufficient. The *sūtras* themselves declare that true insight is reserved for those who possess the necessary inner preparedness. Anyone may hear a teaching, but its meaning reveals itself differently, in proportion to the maturity of one's mind (*adhikāritva*). Merely possessing argumentative skill or intelligence does not entitle one to grasp the intention of the Brahmasūtras.

Just as wearing a Gandhi cap and repeating slogans of non-violence and truth does not make one a true follower of the Mahatma, similarly, many today profess "mouth-Vedānta"—lip-service to the lofty declarations of the Upaniṣads—without embodying their meaning.

What, then, is the "entry fee" to the association of true Vedāntins? It is declared in the very first *sūtra*:

"***Athāto brahmajijñāsā***" – "Now, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman."

This *jijñāsā*—this deep yearning to know Brahman—must necessarily arise. The word *atah* ("therefore") signifies that *brahmajijñāsā* becomes meaningful only after the recognition that the supreme goal (*parama-puruṣārtha*) can be attained solely through *brahmajñāna*. The Upaniṣads declare: *"Nāsyakṛtaḥ kṛtena" – Liberation, which is uncreated, cannot be attained by any action.* Thus, for those who are convinced that *mokṣa* is not the fruit of *karma*, but of Self-knowledge born of Vedānta, *brahmajijñāsā* is imperative.

The word *atha* also implies a temporal sequence: *only after* the acquisition of the fourfold qualifications (*sādhana-catuṣṭaya*)—discrimination (*viveka*), dispassion (*vairāgya*), the sixfold inner virtues (*ṣaṭ-sampatti*), and intense yearning for liberation (*mumukṣutva*)—does one become fit for Vedāntic inquiry. This is the real offering (*dakṣiṇā*) to be made for membership in the assembly of those who tread the path of *Vedānta-vicāra*.

Hence, it becomes evident: mere study of the Upaniṣads is not enough. Though it may be easy to declare oneself a Vedāntin, true Vedānta demands far more than verbal repetition of slogans. Without inner refinement and spiritual discipline (*adhyātma-sādhana*), the fruits of Vedāntic contemplation will not ripen.

Understanding the significance of that one word—*atha*—reveals the profound difficulty in attaining Vedāntic knowledge. It is not a casual undertaking. Many mistake Vedānta for the mere parroting of phrases like "*Brahma satyam*" (Brahman is real) and "*jagat mithyā*" (the world is illusory), without realizing that such statements must be deeply internalized through sustained spiritual effort.

Even the simplest forms of *sādhana* are challenging for most. Consider this anecdote: workers dismissed from a textile mill were lamenting their poverty. A devout merchant offered them a job: "Sit peacefully in the garden for five hours a day and chant the name of Rāma. I will pay you ten rupees." But they could not sit still even for an hour. "Give us physical work—digging, grinding, carrying loads—anything! But this *japa* work is impossible for us," they exclaimed.

So too, in the realm of Vedānta, we may speak endlessly about non-duality, but when it comes to the actual practice of *adhyātma-sādhana*, where do we stand?

The Fourfold Qualifications for Vedāntic Inquiry

The very first *sūtra* of the Vedānta Sūtras—***"Athāto brahmajijñāsā"***—makes it clear: without the requisite qualifications, inquiry into Brahman will bear no fruit. The *Brahma Sūtras* do not call merely for intellectual curiosity, but for deep, inward preparedness. This preparedness is summarized as the *sādhana-catuṣṭaya*, the fourfold means of liberation.

1. Viveka: ***Nityānitya-viveka*** – Discrimination between the eternal and the non-eternal. True liberation (*mokṣa*) is eternal. It cannot be attained through impermanent means such as *karma*. Therefore, the seeker must clearly discern: "I do not desire anything that can be attained through action." Worlds like *Pitṛloka*, *Devaloka*, or even *Brahmaloka*—however exalted—are limited and ultimately impermanent. Thus arises:

2. Vairāgya: *ihāmutra-phala-bhoga-virāga*: dispassion toward the enjoyments of this world and the next.

Such discrimination and detachment are exceedingly rare. Even among those who profess Vedānta—reciting scriptures, quoting texts, and living off its name—how many truly embody *viveka* and *vairāgya*?

3. Śamādi-ṣaṭ-sampatti – The sixfold inner wealth.

- *Śama* is mastery over the mind.

- *Dama* is control over the senses.
  The ignorant chase outer pleasures; the wise, turning away, seek immortality within—so declares the *śruti*. But *śama* and *dama* are not mere words. They demand resolute courage and inner strength.

- *Uparati* is the cessation of ritual action—renouncing worldly *karmas* and dedicating the intellect wholly to the contemplation of Brahman. This is not escapism, but transcendence. Man, by nature, clings to activity—even if meaningless. But the true aspirant relinquishes all action done with desire and turns the mind inward. How difficult this is!

- *Titikṣā* is forbearance—the quiet endurance of heat and cold, pain and pleasure. Since Brahman is free from dualities, so too must the seeker become unshaken by them.

- *Śraddhā* is faith—not blind belief, but the deep conviction that the Brahman taught in the scriptures is real, and that realizing It will bestow the highest *puruṣārtha*.

- *Samādhāna* is the mind's single-pointed focus on the Self, free from distractions and wandering tendencies.

These six—*śama*, *dama*, *uparati*, *titikṣā*, *śraddhā*, *samādhāna*—are collectively called the *ṣaṭka-sampatti*, the third requisite for *brahmajijñāsā*.

4. Mumukṣutva – The intense yearning for liberation.
Even when *viveka*, *vairāgya*, and inner virtues are present, unless there is a burning desire for release from *saṃsāra*, one cannot engage sincerely in the inquiry into Brahman.

The seeker must feel with urgency:

> "This existence is bondage—both *puṇya* and *pāpa* bind me to the wheel of birth and death. I must be freed *now*. Only knowledge of Brahman can destroy this bondage of ignorance."

This burning desire was exemplified by saints like Eknāth, who dismissed the celestial powers (*aṣṭa-siddhis*) offered by Lakṣmī as mere trifles. Such *mumukṣutva* is born of great dispassion and maturity.

The hero who has abandoned all action born of desire, endured the trials of duality, and turned inward with a still mind, alone develops the deep realization:

> "Ignorance is bondage. Self-knowledge alone is liberation."

Such a one becomes fit—*adhikārī*—for *brahmajijñāsā*.

Just as one diving into deep water must leave behind all fear and hesitation, so too, only the one fully convinced of the burning torment of *saṃsāra* and the necessity of liberation can plunge with one-pointed mind into the inquiry of Brahman.

This is why, even before approaching the Brahma Sūtras, one must take a sober look at oneself and ask: "Am I prepared?" Not merely intellectually, but in my very way of living—am I living for truth? Let us now proceed to contemplate the next question: What exactly is meant by *brahmajijñāsā*—inquiry into Brahman?

32 Obstacles to the Practice of Sutra Prasthana

(30-8-53)

The Necessity of Qualifications for Brahma Inquiry

Yesterday, we discussed the word *atha* in Bādarāyaṇa's first *sūtra*. *Brahma-jijñāsā*—the inquiry into Brahman—might seem straightforward at first. Why, then, are the *sādhanacatuṣṭaya* (fourfold qualifications) emphasized as a prerequisite? One might wonder: "The *Upaniṣads* are in Sanskrit—so understanding language, grammar, and lexicon may be necessary—but why insist on *viveka*, *vairāgya*, and such inner virtues?"

The answer lies in the condition of the *antaḥkaraṇa* (inner instrument). In its present state, it lacks the purity and refinement required to grasp the reality that Vedānta points to. The *Upaniṣads* speak of Brahman as blissful. But this *antaḥkaraṇa*, clouded by ignorance and restlessness, perceives only a world of sorrow and conflict. How can such a mind recognize the world as the manifestation of blissful Brahman?

Even when delicious food is served and others are seen to enjoy it, someone with a bitter tongue remains untouched by the taste. Similarly, although Brahman is ever present—"here and now"—our impure *antaḥkaraṇa* cannot taste its bliss.

Thus, a transformation of the seeker's inner instrument is essential. Only after reaching a state prepared by appropriate discipline and maturity does the meaning of Vedānta begin to shine forth. The *sādhanacatuṣṭaya* alluded to in the word *atha*—is not merely a moral prerequisite; it is the refinement required to render the seeker inwardly capable of *brahma-jijñāsā*.

For those who approach Vedānta out of casual interest, *sādhanā* may not be necessary. Anyone may read Vedāntic texts with curiosity. But for the one who believes Vedānta points toward a real and supreme result, *jijñāsā* must be preceded by inner preparation. Only after acquiring the fourfold qualifications can one meaningfully engage in inquiry into Brahman.

What Is Brahman?

The word *Brahman* comes from the root *bṛh*, meaning “that which is the greatest in every way.” It refers to that which is of the nature of eternal purity, consciousness, and freedom (*nitya-śuddha-buddha-mukta-svarūpa*), that which is *sarvajña* (all-knowing) and *sarvaśakta* (all-powerful).

If such a Brahman were entirely unknown or unknowable, inquiry into it would be impossible. However, Śaṅkarācārya affirms that Brahman is in fact well known—for Brahman is none other than our own *ātman*, the innermost Self. The *Upaniṣads* declare this repeatedly.

Since the Self is directly experienced by all, Brahman, too, is not an unknown object. Still, a doubt arises: if Brahman is our own Self, and the Self is already known to all, then why inquire into Brahman at all? After all, no one asks, “Am I myself or not?”

This doubt is partly valid and partly mistaken. Yes, Brahman is indeed our own Self. But what exactly is this *ātman*? That is a matter of great confusion.

Some say the body is the *ātman* and nothing more. Others claim the senses, or the mind, or the intellect. Some reject the very existence of any *ātman*. The *Pūrva Mīmāṃsakas* affirm an *ātman* distinct from the body, who is the *kartā* (doer) and *bhoktā* (enjoyer), though even among them there is disagreement. Some posit a separate *Īśvara* distinct from the individual *ātman*; others say *Īśvara* is the inner Self of the *bhoktā* (enjoyer). Due to this multitude of conflicting views, Śaṅkara emphasized the need to properly investigate the *ātman* and its true nature (*svarūpa*).

Such disputes about the inherent nature of the Self (*ātmasvarūpa)* were present in Śaṅkara’s time, and they remain unresolved even today. Even today, great philosophers opine whether a Self distinct from the body exists, and if so, what is its absolute nature (*pāramārtha-svarúpa*)? Our entire conduct—and even our sense of life’s purpose—varies depending on our view of the Self. One who drifts through life aimlessly, acting according to mere impulse, is far from the path of discrimination and wisdom. If there is a supreme goal of life (*parama-puruṣārtha*), it will be missed by a person without clarity regarding the Self. Thus, it could be said that *Brahma-jijñāsā* is the duty of all those with discrimination.

What Is Brahma-jijñāsā?

Brahma-jijñāsā means the desire (*icca*) to know Brahman. It is the effort to attain *brahma-jñāna*. But what exactly is *brahma-jñāna*?

Even in Śaṅkara’s time, there were differences of opinion. Some earlier commentators (*vṛttikāras*) equated *jñāna* with *upāsanā* (meditation), and in some contexts, the *Upaniṣads* themselves use the term *jñāna* to refer to meditative practice (*upāsanā* and *dhyāna*). But followers of Śaṅkara strongly opposed the claim that all *brahma-jñāna* in Vedānta is *upāsanā*.

Just as in the world we distinguish *vastutantra-jñāna*—knowledge that is dependent on the object itself—so too, the *Vedānta* teaches a *jñāna* that reveals the *Brahma-vastu* (the reality that is Brahman). It is through this object-revealing knowledge that the *ajñāna* which causes *saṃsāra* is destroyed.

This, Śaṅkara says, is the essential purport of Vedānta. It is what Bādarāyaṇa begins to establish in the very first *sūtra*. Just as differences in the pronunciation of *praṇava* must be

resolved at the outset of *adhyāyana*, so too, the dispute over the nature of *brahma-jñāna* must be examined at the very beginning.

Misunderstandings in the Interpretation of *Brahma-jñāna*

The question of how we should determine the meaning of *brahma-jñāna* as referenced in the *Sūtras* is of utmost importance. Many, particularly those educated in the Western academic system, even while professing rationality, are subtly influenced by blind imitation. Due to limited knowledge of Sanskrit and an overreliance on English translations, their understanding of Vedānta has become colored by second-hand views.

Consider Thibaut, the Western scholar who translated Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya* into English. In his introduction, he boldly asserts that Rāmānuja's interpretation of the *Brahma Sūtras* is more faithful than that of Śaṅkara. Many English-speaking readers, unfamiliar with the primary texts, have accepted this claim without question. But should not Śaṅkara's own views be examined first? Would it not be more rigorous to compare his *Bhāṣya* directly with Rāmānuja's before passing judgment?

Unfortunately, Thibaut did not do this. Instead, he assumed that Śaṅkara's view is adequately represented in secondary commentarial traditions like Ānandagiri's *Nyāyanirṇaya* or Vācaspati Miśra's *Bhāmatī*, without any sustained analysis of whether these truly preserve Śaṅkara's original teaching. The result is a misrepresentation—not of Rāmānuja, but of Śaṅkara.

The Misplaced Authority of Commentary Traditions

Even among those well-versed in Sanskrit and familiar with Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya*, confusion persists. In many cases, the authority granted to Ānandagiri's gloss now seems to eclipse even the authority of the *Veda*. It is unclear whether any commentary on the *Prasthāna-traya Bhāṣya* existed before Ānandagiri, but today, students often feel compelled to consult his works to understand Śaṅkara himself.

Let this not be misunderstood: Ānandagiri's writings have indeed been valuable; I, too, have learned much from them. But one must ask: by what reasoning can we accept opinions that contradict Śaṅkara's explicit words merely because they appear in a commentary? The situation is not unlike the proverb: "Even if God grants the boon, the priest won't permit it." Often, it is these interposing commentaries that confuse rather than clarify Śaṅkara's intent.

As a result, the universally accepted teachings of Śaṅkarabhagavatpāda have become obscured. Many distinguished scholars have been misled by the illusion that all these commentators belong to a single lineage or express a unified view. But the evidence tells another story.

In fact, multiple individuals bearing the name Ānandagiri appear in the tradition, often contradicting one another. In one place, an Ānandagiri refutes the non-dualist view; in another, he defends it with vigor. The Ānandagiri who is said to have been a direct disciple of Śaṅkara, as portrayed in the *Śaṅkara-vijaya*, is shown debating long after Śaṅkara's lifetime—a historical impossibility. Yet today, many treat all works bearing the name Ānandagiri as if they were issued from the same pen, with final authority.

When I pointed out that relying solely on this commentary tradition is neither adequate nor reliable, some in our own Mysore province branded me “untraditional.” For several years, this criticism persisted. Now, thankfully, the intensity has lessened, and some are willing to admit, “There is some aspect of truth in what you say.”

Disagreement Even Within the Tradition

One main reason why it is erroneous to treat the interpretations of later commentators (*vyākhyānakāras*) as authoritative pramāṇa in every respect is that none of these commentators have faithfully conveyed Śaṅkara’s true intention as it is. In fact, even on fundamental points concerning what precisely Śaṅkarācārya’s view is, they hold mutually conflicting opinions. I have pointed out these divergences among the various interpretive traditions on different occasions. Nevertheless, let me offer one example here for illustration.

According to the Śaṅkaran doctrine, it is only through the knowledge of Brahman that ignorance *(ajñāna*) is removed. But what exactly is the nature of this ignorance? What is its locus (*āśraya*) and what is its object (*viṣaya*)?—on these crucial issues, the commentators have put forth views that are extremely contradictory.

One school holds that the *jīva* is the locus of ignorance (*ajñāna)*. Since the *jīva* is found to not know Brahman, it is necessary to undertake *brahma-jijñāsā* (inquiry into Brahman) to realize It. To say that ignorance takes as its locus the *jīva*—who is itself deluded—is to speak incoherently, for how can ignorance of the knowledge of Brahman–which is of the nature of pure Knowledge–reside in the very entity that is supposed to be seeking Brahman? According to this view, ignorance appears diversely among individual beings, and is destroyed through their respective knowledge. This is the position taken by one school of commentators.

Rejecting this view, another interpretive tradition proposes something entirely different: that ignorance or ajñāna is not merely an error of non-grasping or of misapprehension and its latent impressions (*agrahaṇa, mithyājñāna, tatsamskāra)*, but is instead a beginningless, inert force (*jaḍātmaka śakti*) that depends upon the reality of consciousness (*cit-sattā*). According to this school, ajñāna does not inhere in the individual *jīva*. If so, then jīvatva (individuality) cannot be a product of ignorance. Consequently, the undivided Consciousness itself, which is free of any division such as jīva and Brahman, must be both the locus and object of ignorance.

Now, who among thoughtful and discerning seekers can accept that both of these entirely opposing positions can simultaneously represent Śaṅkarācārya’s authentic view?

These commentators have become like two priests quarreling with each other, disrupting the very worship of the deity and ending up locking the doors of the temple! It is as though they are saying to Śaṅkarācārya himself, “Be quiet, sir! We are the ones now in charge; we shall fight it out amongst ourselves and establish what your doctrine really is!”

As a result, it has become nearly impossible for the common man today to understand what Vedānta truly is. When Vedānta, under the garb of endless commentarial disputes, is thus reduced to polemics, it leads to nothing but idle talk—people sitting around, debating whether the means or the end is real, or speculating on how the face of a *Brahma-jñānī*

would look! Such Vedānta, confined to useless argument, resembles the rambling of those who puff on hookahs and rhapsodize about philosophy as the intoxication rises. It has become a Vedānta of pipe-smoking and empty bluster. In this way, Vedānta appears fragmented into innumerable branches and sub-branches, each going its own separate way.

Amidst this noisy fragmentation, the true voice of Śaṅkarabhagavatpāda is lost. Everyone proclaims to be a Vedāntin, everyone takes Śaṅkara's name with pride—yet few bother to read or reflect on his actual words. If his original writings were lost to us, one might excuse this confusion. But his authentic works are available. Just as we have his commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*, his definitive commentary on the *Sūtra Prasthāna* is still with us. When doubts or disputes arise about his teaching, should we not first turn to these works? In his own *Bhāṣya*, Śaṅkara has responded to these very questions. Why then do we not go directly to the source?

A story comes to mind. Some scholars once falsely reported to the king that the poet Bharju had died. The king, deeply saddened, mourned him. But some time later, he heard Bharju's voice reciting verses nearby. Overjoyed, he rushed toward it—only to be told again by the same scholars, "That's just a ghost." Similarly, when we hear the voice of Śaṅkarācārya resounding through his *Bhāṣyas*, are we told again and again, "Don't listen! That's not his real voice; rely instead on our interpretation"? This attitude must end.

Let us now gather our courage and approach *Śri Śaṅkara's* works directly. Let us make the intention to study his commentaries and understand it as living wisdom to be embraced. Let us pray to him: *O best of teachers, please Grace us so we understand your teachings from your own words!*

33. *Brahma-jijñāsa*

(31-8-53)

Karma and Jñāna: The Two Wings of the Vedas

The Vedas are broadly divided into two sections: the *Karma-kāṇḍa* and the *Jñāna-kāṇḍa*. While the *Jñāna-kāṇḍa* also includes certain forms of worship as *mānasa karma* (mental acts), its principal aim is to convey *Brahma-jñāna*—knowledge that is *vastu-tantra* (dependent on the object, not the subject). To ascertain the purport of the Vedic statements in both these sections, the revered discipline known as *Mīmāṃsā* is employed. The inquiry into the *Karma-kāṇḍa* is called *Pūrvamīmāṃsā*, while that into the *Jñāna-kāṇḍa* is known as *Uttarāmīmāṃsā*. The *Jaimini Sūtras*, foundational to Pūrvamīmāṃsā, begin with "*Athāto dharma-jijñāsā*," while the *Brahmasūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa, foundational to Uttarāmīmāṃsā, begin with "*Athāto brahma-jijñāsā*."

In Pūrvamīmāṃsā, the subject of inquiry is *karma* (ritual action), and the fruit is *abhyudaya*—elevation in the form of heavenly worlds such as *svarga*. In contrast, the Brahma-vicāra undertaken in Uttaramīmāṃsā leads to *niḥśreyasa*—liberation (*mokṣa*), the ultimate goal. In the Pūrvamīmāṃsā, the *karma* to be known does not already exist in the knower at the time of knowledge; it must be performed and brought into being. In the Uttarāmīmāṃsā, however, *Brahman* exists as an ever-present reality. Therefore, its

knowledge is not of something to be newly produced but of something already existent, and that very knowledge is the means to its realization.

The knowledge of karma generates an imperative—*kartavyatā jñāna*, or knowledge in the form of "this must be done." This gives rise to questions like: "What should be done? With what should it be done? In what manner should it be done?" This inquiry, being action-oriented, is future-directed and anticipatory. By contrast, knowledge of *Brahman* is not like this. It is immediate and complete in itself. Its fruit—liberation—is obtained simultaneously with the knowledge, requiring no supplementary effort. This, according to Śaṅkarācārya, is the key distinction between the two *Mīmāṃsās*. Since *Brahman* is already real and existent, knowledge of it yields its fruit independently, at once. For this reason, all those qualified for the inquiry may approach *Brahman*, realize the result of that inquiry, and verify it within their own experience. Hence, the *Brahma-upadeśa* (teaching of Brahman) given by the Ācārya is truly universal.

What is Meant by *Brahma-jijñāsā*?

The first *sūtra* contains the compound expression *brahma-jijñāsā*, consisting of *brahma* and *jijñāsā*. The term *jijñāsā* means the desire to know (*jñānāya icchā*). Thus, *brahma-jijñāsā* signifies a desire to know *Brahman*. Here, three things are being spoken of: *brahman*, *jñāna*, and *jijñāsā* (desire or inquiry). The compound *brahma-jñāna* (knowledge of Brahman) is itself a *tatpuruṣa* compound, and it is necessary to understand what part of the compound holds primacy.

In Sanskrit, not all compounds function the same way. In some compounds, the first member dominates (*karmadhāraya*), as in *aṅgai* (palm), where "hand" is primary. In others, both members are equally significant (*dvandva*), as in *Rāma-Lakṣmaṇa*. In yet others, a third referent not explicitly mentioned becomes primary (*bahuvrīhi*), such as *mukkanna* (three-eyed one), referring to Śiva. But in a *tatpuruṣa* compound like *aramane* (palace), it is not the king (*rāja*) but his house that is referred to—the second element governs.

Likewise, in *brahma-jñāna*, the focus is not merely on *brahman* or *jñāna* in isolation, but on *knowledge of Brahman* as such. The inquiry is about Brahman as the subject of knowledge; the desire (*jijñāsā*) is for the knowledge of Brahman, and that knowledge alone leads to the highest *puruṣārtha*—liberation. Therefore, the central theme of the *sūtra* is that Brahman is the object of this inquiry, and the seeker must strive to realize the knowledge of this Brahman. This is the purport of the opening *sūtra* of the *Brahmasūtras*.

The Meaning of the Genitive Case in 'Brahma-jijñāsā'

We now turn to examine the grammatical construction of the phrase *brahma-jijñāsā*, particularly the genitive suffix implied in the word *brahmaṇah*. In the *Brahmasūtras*, the focus is not solely on *Brahman* as an abstract concept. As stated earlier, the *Vedānta-darśana*—that is, the inquiry into *Brahman*—seeks to demonstrate that this teaching is not in conflict with *śruti* (scripture) or with reason. It also encompasses discussions on the *upāsanā* (worship) of *Brahman*, the fruits of deliberation, and the outcomes of such worship. Thus, the subject matter of this inquiry comprises all that pertains to *Brahman*, making it a deliberation centered on *Brahman*.

From one perspective, the genitive case here could be taken as *śeṣa-ṣaṣṭhī*, which loosely indicates association rather than direct action—something like, "an inquiry pertaining to Brahman." This is acceptable in general usage. However, according to Śaṅkarācārya's

tradition, the genitive here is to be understood as *karma-arthaka ṣaṣṭhī*—a genitive that expresses the object of an action. In any action, the object (*karmakāraka*) is the most significant element, as it is the thing one desires to know or obtain.

In contrast to *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*, where the primary concern is *dharma*, here it is the *tattva* (reality) of *Brahman* that is of supreme concern. To emphasize that the enquiry is not into duties or rituals, but into *Brahman* as the object of knowledge, it is more appropriate to take the genitive in the sense of *karma-ṣaṣṭhī*. Though this grammatical distinction may seem subtle or even obscure to some, for our present purposes it is enough to understand this: *Brahman*, and not *upāsanā* or ritual, is the principal topic of this inquiry. Since *upāsanā* is an act—and acts already fall within the domain of *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*—there would be no need for a new inquiry into it here. Or, if such were the aim, the *sūtra* would have begun not with "*brahma-jijñāsā*" but rather with "*pariśiṣṭa-dharma-jijñāsā*"—a continuation of ritual concerns.

Hence, it is the *karma-ṣaṣṭhī* usage that signals the centrality of *Brahman* as the object of knowledge.

Is *Brahman* Known or Unknown?

One might now ask: "If *Brahman* is utterly unknown, how is inquiry even possible? But if it is already known, why should it be inquired into?" This is a natural doubt. The response is: *Brahman* is not an empty term. The word means 'that which is greatest in all respects'—a principle of infinite magnitude. In that general sense, its meaning is intelligible.

Moreover, the *Upaniṣads* identify *Brahman* with the *Ātman* (Self). And the *Ātman* is certainly not unknown—it is that which is most immediate and self-evident. Hence, it is not unreasonable to undertake an inquiry into *Brahman*. But then, why not say *ātmā-jijñāsā*—an inquiry into the *Self*?

This too is a reasonable question. Yet such an objection is common to every domain of inquiry: "If the subject is already known, why investigate? If it is unknown, how can one begin at all?" The standard solution is that what is *generally* known must be inquired into for the sake of determining its *specific* nature.

In the present case, we all refer to ourselves as "I"—but what exactly is this *I*? Is it the body? The senses? The mind? The intellect? Or something beyond all these? These are the doubts that prompt philosophical inquiry. Vedānta resolves these doubts through *vicāra* (discernment) and reveals that the *Ātman* is one and the same in all beings.

Taittirīya's Illustration: The Inquiry of Bṛgu

Consider the dialogue in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, where Bṛgu approaches his father Varuṇa and asks, "Teach me *Brahman*." Varuṇa replies, "That from which all beings are born, by which they live, and into which they finally merge—that is *Brahman*."

Following this guidance, Bṛgu contemplates *anna* (food), *prāṇa* (vital breath), *manas* (mind), and *vijñāna* (intellect), each in succession. As he progresses, he sees increasing signs of the nature of *Brahman*. Finally, he arrives at *ānanda* (bliss) and declares: "*ānandaṃ brahma iti vijānāt*"—"Bliss is *Brahman*." The *Upaniṣad* then states: "From bliss, all beings are born; by bliss, they live; into bliss, they return." Thus, the *śruti* concludes that *ānanda* is the nature of *Brahman*.

What then is the mistake of the bound soul (*saṃsārī*)? He identifies himself as the enjoyer, the sufferer, the subject of worldly bondage. But this, Vedānta says, is a misconception. The real Self is not this limited ego but *Brahman*, whose nature is bliss. It is to correct this error and reveal our true identity that *Brahma-jijñāsā* must be undertaken.

The Sūtra and Śruti, Purāṇas

Thus, there is a clear connection between the *Śruti* and the *Bādarāyaṇa Sūtra*; the meaning of the *Śruti* is precisely determined in the *Sūtra*. The task of the commentators—*Ācāryas*—is to unfold what Bādarāyaṇa has established, in a manner that resonates with both reasoning (*yukti*) and experience (*anubhava*).

If we find ourselves without knowledge of Vedānta, we should not dismiss it. Though the kingdom of bliss is already our own, until the light of Vedānta arises, we continue to dwell in the realm of sorrow. *Vedānta* calls out to each one of us: “Understand the Truth and become fulfilled!”

The *Purāṇas* too have emerged to convey this same principle in an accessible form. However, failing to grasp the secret behind invoking the one Ultimate Reality through various names—*Śiva*, *Viṣṇu*, *Gaṇapati*, *Sūrya*, *Śakti*, and so on—people fall into fruitless disputes about whether *Śiva* is superior or *Viṣṇu* is superior. Just as every person requires a garment suited to their size, so too the *Purāṇas* present divine forms and stories in ways that appeal to diverse minds and temperaments.

All of this springs from the Universally Accepted Teachings of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya. As the *Śivamahimna Stotra* proclaims:
“Rucināṁ vaicitryādṛjukutilanānāpathajuṣām tvameko gamyo'si” — "Because of the diversity of tastes, people walk straight or crooked paths, but You alone are the ultimate destination."

This reveals that all are in search of the same Supreme. Not only Hindus, but followers of other religions also worship God under various names, each regarding their form of God as the highest. Hence, the name used in Vedānta—*Brahman*, the Greatest—is appropriate as a universally acceptable term.

A hallmark of Vedānta is its affirmation that *Brahman* is none other than the *Ātman*—our own Self—realizable here and now through *tattva-vicāra*, profound inquiry into Reality. If *Brahman* is our very essence, immediately accessible and knowable now, who would not rejoice? The notion that Vedānta is meant only for the aged or the intellectual elite is a serious misunderstanding. In truth, we already suffer the sense of limitation—while *Brahman* is the limitless, ever-blissful Reality. To postpone the inquiry into the infinite, all-pervading Self until the decline of our faculties and vitality is a great folly.

Brahman means the Supreme Reality, and the contemplation of that Supreme is the gateway to all *puruṣārthas*—the aims of human life. Though Vedānta declares this again and again, we continue to suffer worldly sorrow by clinging to our limited, mistaken identity with the body. Let us first and foremost internalize the truth: *Brahman* is the infinite, blissful *Ātman* dwelling as the Self of all.

The Vedānta texts use a wide array of names for Brahman. Reflecting on the contexts and subjects in which these appear, it becomes evident that all such names ultimately refer to

the Supreme Self. For instance, *prāṇa* is used as a name of Brahman, highlighting its role as the vital force underlying all activities, much like prāṇa's centrality to the body. The term *jyoti* points to Brahman's self-luminosity, and *ākāśa* suggests its boundless, all-pervading nature. Thus, Brahman is designated by various terms, and it is only through reasoned interpretation—such as that employed in the *Samanvayādhyāya* of the *Brahmasūtra*—that we discern the unity underlying these diverse appellations. This process confirms that these names denote the same non-dual Reality, characterized by extraordinary, unworldly attributes.

Clarifying the Role of Knowledge (*jñāna*)

Having considered the word *Brahman* in the sūtra, we now turn to *jñāna*—knowledge. *Brahmajñāna* is knowledge of Brahman, and such knowledge alone is capable of removing *avidyā*, the ignorance that causes bondage. According to Śaṅkarācārya, this ignorance is nothing other than the mutual superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of Self and non-self. Although later Advaitins have written at length on whether ignorance is located in Brahman or in the individual soul, whether it is singular or multiple, and whether it precedes individuality (*jīvatva*) or arises from it—such questions only distract from the real issue.

Instead of pursuing the enquiry into Brahman (*brahmajijñāsā*), they have veered into a misplaced enquiry into ignorance itself (*avidyājijñāsā*). Śaṅkara, however, was unequivocal. Ignorance is the failure to distinguish between the pure Self and the instruments of perception and action. It is seen in our daily usage of the pronoun "I," where the Self is wrongly conflated with the mind, intellect, or inner instrument (*antaḥkaraṇa*). Mistaking the reflected awareness of the inner instrument for the true Self is comparable to mistaking a halo for the deity. Discerning between the Self and the non-self, thereby determining their respective natures, is *vidyā*—knowledge.

Those who introduce alternate theories of ignorance—independent of this mutual superimposition—neglect the direct teaching of the ācārya. They leave aside the real tiger within and go off to slay an imaginary tiger outside.

Nature of Liberation (*puruṣārtha*) and the Role of Knowledge

What, then, is the fruit (*puruṣārtha*) of this knowledge? It is neither a newly acquired joy nor a freshly eliminated sorrow. Rather, it is *prāpta-prāpti*—the gaining of what was already ours—and *parihṛta-parihāra*—the removal of a sorrow that never truly existed. *Knowledge does not bring about change; it reveals. It does not create bliss or destroy sorrow—it simply unmasks their real status.*

The sorrow of *saṃsāra* is not real, and trying to remove it as though it were, is like trying to arrest the movement of the sky. Likewise, our innate bliss is already ever-present, and seeking it elsewhere is like searching for ourselves as if we were lost. Still, due to ignorance, Brahman remains unrecognized.

Because ignorance obscures the Self's already-existing knowledge and bliss, the misery of transmigration appears to persist. Therefore, to recover what is already present and to eliminate what was never real, the sūtra declares: "*Athāto Brahmajijñāsā*" – Now, therefore, an inquiry into Brahman.

34. Brahma-jñāna

(1-9-53)

The Nature of Inquiry into Brahman

Since the supreme *puruṣārtha*—the highest human goal—is attained solely through *Brahmajñāna*, it is imperative that one endowed with the fourfold qualifications (*sādhana-catuṣṭaya*) undertakes the inquiry into Brahman. This is the essence of the first *sūtra* of the *Brahmasūtra*. Because Brahman is none other than our own Self, and because various conflicting views exist regarding its precise nature, such inquiry is necessary. Once an eligible seeker gains *Brahma-jñāna*, no further practice is needed; the realization of Brahman and the cessation of sorrow occur simultaneously.

The *Upaniṣads* assign many names to Brahman, yet Brahman itself is beyond all *śabda* (verbal expression) and *pratyaya* (mental notion). It is the very witness of both. To recognize this is *Brahma-jñāna*—knowledge that destroys ignorance and grants the supreme *puruṣārtha*.

A Note on Interpretation: Knowledge and Realization

A subtle debate arises regarding the term *jijñāsā* (desire to know). In his commentary, Ācārya Śaṅkara writes:

"*jñātum icchā jijñāsā | avagati-paryantaṃ jñānaṃ sanvācchāyā icchāyāḥ karma | phala-viṣayatvād icchāyāḥ*"— Desire to know is *jijñāsā*; inquiry culminating in Self-knowledge (*avagati)* is the action springing from that desire, since desire is always oriented towards a fruit.

Some take this to imply a distinction between *jñāna* as indirect conceptual knowledge (*parokṣa-jñāna*) and *avagati* as direct, meditative experience (*sākṣātkāra rūpa anubhava*). They interpret this *Bhāsya* sentence to mean that *sākṣātkāra* itself is *jñāna.* We have already mentioned that the word *brahma-sākṣātkāra* is rarely used in bhāsya, and that Ācārya has consistently refuted the position that one needs to make efforts for *sākṣātkāra* after *jñāna* is obtained. Therefore, it is necessary here to show the proper interpretation of the commentary in keeping with the *siddhānta*.

In Sanskrit grammar, the suffix *sa* in *jijñāsā* is a *san*-pratyaya, which denotes desire. So what is desired in *brahma-jijñāsā*? The compound *brahma-jñāna* is a *tatpuruṣa*, where the second term (*jñāna*) predominates. Like *bhojana* (eating), which can refer to the act, the means, or the result, *jñāna* too can signify all three. So we must carefully consider which of these meanings is appropriate here. It becomes necessary to conclude that jñāna in this context does not refer to either the instruments of knowledge or the act of knowing, but only to the final result—the fruit (*phala-rūpa*) in the form of knowledge.

For instance, if someone intends to cook a meal, no one understands this intent merely by their engaging in actions such as putting smoke in their eyes (a preliminary activity) or assembling cooking utensils. Rather, it is understood only because they are ultimately aiming for the cooked rice. Hence, in that context, cooking means the cooked food itself. Similarly here, since the suffix implies a desire (*icchā*) and since in the world desires are always for results (fruits), it follows that *jñāna* here does not mean the act or means of knowing, but rather the knowledge that appears as a fruit.

Knowledge as Fruit, Not Worship

This Self-knowledge (*avagati*), being of the nature of cognition (*jñāna*), is not an action (*kriyā*) but a notion (*pratyaya-rūpa*) of the culmination at the end of the process of inquiry as the very nature (svarūpa) of the Self. Though this Self-knowledge —which is nothing but the consciousness of the witness-self (*sākṣī*), the immutable Self (*kūṭastha*)—is in reality ever-present, it is said to be a result only because it becomes clearly known at the culmination of inquiry.

This point has been made clear in the section on realization of Self-knowledge (*avagati-prakaraṇa*) in the *Upadeśasāhasrī* (*bhāṣya bhāga*, 65–66). Thus, the *jñāna* spoken of in the word *jijñāsā* refers to this realization, which is none other than the essential nature of the Self (*ātma-svarūpa*) as consciousness. For desire (*icchā*) is always for a result, never for an instrument or a process—this is the intended meaning of the sentence.

Since the jñāna indicated here is oriented toward a fruit and not toward an action, there is no room for the view that this jñāna refers to meditation (*upāsanā*), or that to undertake *brahma-jijñāsā* means to perform some meditative practice. The knowledge intended here is not the imaginative or devotional knowledge such as thinking of a book as Sarasvatī; it is objective knowledge (*vastu-tantra-jñāna*)—knowing the book as a book.

What is prescribed is not meditating upon Brahman as described in the scriptures and attaining liberation through such meditative action. Why? Because anything achieved through action (*kriyā-sādhya*), like heaven (*svarga*) and other results, is impermanent. What is to be realized here is that Brahman, who is the eternal *kūṭastha*, is none other than our very Self (*ātman*). This alone is *jñāna*, and it alone leads to eternal liberation (*mokṣa-prāpti*).

This interpretation of the sentence is supported by the continuation of the Brahma-sūtra itself. For the Ācārya (Śaṅkara) says:

> "*jñānena hi pramāṇena avagamyate iṣṭaṃ brahma. brahmāvagatir hi puruṣārthaḥ. niḥśeṣa-saṃsāra-bīja-avidyādy-anartha-nibarhaṇāt. tasmād brahma jijñāsitavyam."*

That is, "Is it not so that Brahman is to be known through knowledge as the means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*)? For the realization of Brahman (*brahma-avagati*) is itself the ultimate goal of human life (*puruṣārtha*), since it removes all misfortunes beginning with ignorance—the seed of saṃsāra. Therefore, Brahman must be inquired into."

Thus, jñāna is a means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and not the fruit itself. The fruit is the realization (*avagati*) that arises through that pramāṇa. Hence, what is desired in *jijñāsā* is the realization (*avagati-rūpa*), not the mere act of grinding sugarcane or singing praises—both of which pertain to mere instrumental acts, not to the final result.

Some modern Vedāntins mistakenly interpret everything in terms of Brahman being the *upādānakāraṇa* (material cause), and assert *mūlāvidyā* (root ignorance) as the seed of *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth and death). However, the traditional formulation refers to *avidyādi*—ignorance and its progeny. Ācārya Śaṅkara repeatedly identifies *avidyā*, *kāma* (desire), and *karma* (action) as the constituents of *saṃsārānartha*—the miseries of

transmigratory existence. Misapprehension about the Self (avidyā) gives rise to desire (kāma), which in turn produces karma and the subsequent enjoyment of its fruits, all forming the bondage of saṃsāra.

Kāma here refers to the mental disposition rooted in likes and dislikes. Through *brahmātmajñāna* (knowledge of the Self as Brahman), taught by Ācārya, desire ceases, along with the triad of doer, deed, and result.

"janmādyasya yataḥ"—distinct cause of the world

The second *sūtra* of the Brahmasūtra—"*janmādyasya yataḥ*" (1.1.2)—defines the characteristics of Brahman: the cause of the origination, sustenance, and dissolution of the world. This *sūtra* concerns neither *jñeyabrahma* (Brahman to be known) nor *upāsyabrahma* (Brahman to be worshipped), but it affirms that the object of knowledge here is indeed *jñeyabrahma*.

Why? Because in this *sūtra*, the term 'asya' refers to the world perceived through empirical means. Śaṅkara explains: "*asya jagataḥ nāmarūpābhyāṃ vyākṛtasya anekakartṛbhoktṛsaṃyuktasya pratiniyatadeśakālanimittakriyāphalāśrayasya manasāpy acintyaracanārūpasya janmasthitibhaṅgaṃ yataḥ*"—this world is characterized by names and forms, multiple agents and enjoyers, specificities of time, place, and instrument, and astonishing configurations beyond even the mind's grasp. Therefore, its cause must be without such limitations.

That Supreme Being is Brahman, a conscious entity with omniscience and omnipotence, fundamentally distinct from the empirical world.

Affirming Jñeyabrahma, Not Upāsyabrahma

Some may ask, "Is this an interpretation born of logic, or does it accord with the Vedas?" The very structure of *Uttara Mīmāṃsā* answers this through the later *sūtra* (2.1.14): "*tadananyatvamārambhaṇaśabdādibhyaḥ*." Although it appears that Brahman is the cause and the world the effect, Śaṅkara clarifies that Brahman does not undergo transformation. As the clay remains unchanged in the form of a pot, Brahman remains untouched by the changing world.

This interpretation aligns with Śruti. For example, the effect (*world*) is only a name and form superimposed on Brahman. Thus, this world is not different from Brahman but only appears so. The scriptures declare that the same Brahman, which is the cause of the world, is your Self. Hence, this Vedānta śāstra aims to reveal that Brahman is the inner Self of all beings.

Apparent Creation as Pedagogical

Though the Upaniṣads speak of the world being born from Brahman, sustained in Brahman, and returning to Brahman, this should not be mistaken as an explanation of a real creation. Rather, it is a method of instruction—teaching the non-dual, changeless Brahman as the truth. Śrī Gauḍapāda, in his Māṇḍūkya Kārikā (4.42), says:

"*upalabhyātsamācārādasti vastutvavādinām | jātistu deśitā bhūtajātesatāṃ sadā ||*"

Because the empirical world is seen, and because it fulfills practical needs (*arthakriyā*), the wise have taught creation for those committed to realism. But the real teaching is of the unborn, non-dual Brahman.

Many cling to the apparent world as real, fearing that denying it undermines everyday transactions. For such minds, causal Brahman is introduced as a pedagogical device to direct them toward the higher truth. That, says Gauḍapāda, is the compassionate function of Vedānta.

Imagine a man seeing two objects in dim light: one standing upright, the other leaning against the wall. He fires at one, but the bullet hits the wall, causing only soil to crumble. Upon closer inspection, he realizes one was a pillar, the other its shadow. This illustrates the result of ignorance! The world we perceive as a separate object is merely a false shadow. By realizing its source is Brahman, and that Brahman is the Self, we become fulfilled. This is the teaching of Vedānta.

35. The Vedanta Philosophy and Logic

(2-9-53)

The meaning of the word *jñāna* in *brahmajñāna* has already been clarified. *Jñāna* is not used here in the instrumental sense—as in that by which something is known. Words such as *jñapti*, *avagati*, and *arivu* denote the resultant cognition. This *jñāna* is a *puruṣārtha* because it removes *avidyā* and its subsequent manifestations—desire (*kāma*), action (*karma*), and so forth. *Avidyā* means mutual superimposition between the Self and the non-Self—confusing what is fundamentally distinct. This confusion is the root of all *saṃsāric* afflictions, and the knowledge that dispels it is the highest *puruṣārtha*.

Causal Brahman as Instructional, Not Ontological

Although Brahman is characterized as “that from which the origin and dissolution of the world arise,” this does not entail that Brahman is a literal cause in the transactional sense. The *sūtra* “*tadananyatvamārambhaṇaśabdādibhyaḥ*” is cited to counter such an interpretation. Śruti presents the world as a mere appearance, imagined in Brahman, without independent existence. Hence, the cause-effect structure (*kārya-kāraṅa bhāva*) is not ultimately affirmed, even in this *sūtra*.

Why Not Inferred from the World?

One might argue: “That from which the world originates must be Brahman”—why not simply infer it? Theists in many traditions, both within India and abroad, have argued for a Creator by observing the design and order in the world. Just as a finely crafted watch implies an intelligent maker, should not the intricate universe suggest an omniscient creator?

This reasoning is compelling but insufficient in Vedānta. The *Brahmasūtras* do not operate independently; they serve to interpret the meaning of the *Upaniṣadic* statements. As

Śaṅkara states: *vedāntavākyakusuma-grathanārthatvāt sūtrāṇām*—these *sūtras* are a garland of Vedāntic statements.

Sentence vs. Inference as Means of Knowledge

A critical doubt may arise: Is a verbal testimony (*śabda*) a stronger *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge) than inference (*anumāna*)? Since inference is rooted in perception and deduction, it seems more secure. A sentence, by contrast, appears to demand external validation.

Vedānta responds by distinguishing two kinds of sentences. When a sentence concerns what is already perceptible—like the tenth man story ("You are the tenth!")—it yields immediate, doubt-free knowledge. But when a sentence refers to distant or imperceptible entities—like "there is such a bird on a far-off island"—further validation may be required.

Inference, however, depends on a known relationship between sign and signified. Smoke implies fire because of their inseparability. But in the case of Brahman and the world, we lack perceptual access to Brahman. The world is experienced, but its substratum is not seen. Therefore, inference cannot establish Brahman's relationship to the world. Without knowing that connection beforehand, we cannot logically derive Brahman's existence from worldly phenomena.

Anecdote on Debating God's Existence

This issue is not new. Once, in a hotel, a group awaiting their meal began debating whether God exists. One argued that just as pots require potters, the world must have a creator. Another countered, "We've seen potters, not God creating worlds." A third, losing temper, exclaimed, "So you deny God altogether? Were you born without a father?" Logic gave way to anger—*śeṣaṃ kopeṇa pūrayet*—and the argument turned into noise, almost erupting in conflict. Just then, the hotel owner shouted, "Food is ready, sir!"—and the debate ended with everyone rushing to eat.

This episode humorously illustrates how logic, when unanchored by scriptural insight, leads not to clarity but to quarrel. Vedānta, grounded in *śruti* and refined through *tarka* (reasoning), offers the way out of such chaos.

While the world may be an effect (*kārya*), why must we conclude that its creator is an all-knowing *Īśvara*? Why not assume multiple builders, as we do with a house? Such counter-arguments arise. Moreover, even if we suppose such a God exists, we cannot directly realize *Īśvara* merely by knowing the characteristic of being the cause of the origin of the world (*jagajjanmādikāraṇatva*). Therefore, the *sūtra* is not an exercise in logic (*tarka*), but aims to determine the purport of Vedantic statements (*Vedāntavākya*), as the *ācārya* has explained.

One may ask: what makes the *sūtra* superior simply because it originates from the *Vedāntavākya*, and not from reasoning about the world's creation by *Īśvara*? If Brahman is the cause and the world the effect, does this mean that Brahman has become the world? Or that the Supreme Self (*paramātman*) made the world like a potter makes a pot? How can we understand either possibility merely because *śruti* says so?

Śaṅkarācārya answers that Brahman is both the instrumental (*nimitta*) and material (*upādāna*) cause of the world. However, the familiar cause-effect relationship does not

apply here. In the world, the material cause precedes and transforms into the effect. For example, mud exists before becoming a pot. But in Vedānta, Brahman is all-knowing (*sarvajña*), all-powerful (*sarvaśaktimān*), and the Self of all (*sarvātmā*), of the nature of eternal purity, knowledge, and freedom (*nityaśuddha-buddha-muktasvabhāva*).

The world can never exist apart from Brahman, which is of the nature of pure Consciousness. Since Brahman is our own Self, it is self-established (*svataḥ-siddha*); it requires no *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge) to prove it. But the world, as it appears, is neither distinct from Brahman nor is the same as Brahman. The effect never exists without the cause, does it? Likewise, the world never exists apart from Brahman, and in this sense, it is an effect (*kārya)*. This is the world-causation taught in the *sūtra*.

Reconciling Apparent Contradictions: Ajāti and Cause

Without understanding this, some imagine a conflict: "The *sūtra* writer states *jagajjanmādikāraṇatva* for Brahman, but Gauḍapāda teaches *ajātivāda*—that Brahman never born." This, however, is a misunderstanding. Neither Bādarāyaṇa nor Gauḍapāda nor Śaṅkarācārya affirms that Brahman transforms into the world. Bādarāyaṇa affirms in *Sūtra* 2.1.14, "*tadananyatvamārambhaṇaśabdādibhyaḥ*"—the world (which is kārya or effect) is never different from Brahman (the *kāraṇa* or cause). Gauḍapāda proves that Brahman is never born as the world. The *ācārya* reconciles these perspectives in his commentaries.

However, if one questions: does not the *śruti* speak of the world's origin? Yes—it says that Brahman is born as the world *through māyā*, meaning it appears as the world through ignorance (*ajñāna*), states Gauḍapāda. This is also the meaning of the vedic sentence, "*ajayamāno bahudhā vijāyate*"—the unborn Self appears as many. For those attached to realism of practical entities and the seeming truth of their observed utility, Vedānta presents the illusion of creation as a pedagogical entry point. This is Gauḍapāda's intention in *Kārikā* 4.42, in the *Alātaśānti Prakaraṇa*. Statements such as "the world is the effect, glory, or manifestation (*kārya, mahima, vibhuti)* of Brahman" refer to illusory cause and effect (*māyika kārya kāraṇa*). Remembering this helps resolve seeming contradictions.

Role of Reasoning in Vedānta: Scripturally approved

Even after accepting that the *Brahmasūtra* is meant to determine the intended purport (*tātparya*) of the Vedānta statements, it cannot be said that it entirely rejects the use of reasoning (*tarka*). For, the sūtras frequently employ the instrumental case—"because of this"—indicating causal reasoning. Moreover, the *Śruti* itself declares, "*śrotavyaḥ mantavyaḥ nididhyāsitavyaḥ*"—"It is to be heard, reflected upon, and contemplated." Since this statement clearly mandates not only *śravaṇa* (listening) but also *manana* (reflection), it is evident that reasoning is admitted in Vedānta. If so, why then does a certain *sūtra* appear to condemn reasoning?

To this objection, the explanation given by Ācārya Śaṅkara must be borne in mind. There is a particular *sūtra* in the *Brahmasūtra* (2.1.11):

"tarkāpratiṣṭhānādapyanyathānumeyam iti ced evam apyavimokṣa-prasaṅgaḥ"

"If it be said that (the nature of Brahman) should be inferred otherwise because reasoning has no firm foundation, then it would yield the contingency of there being no liberation."

This *sūtra* is written by Bādarāyaṇa after he has already addressed the objection raised by the Sāṅkhyas, who argued by the strength of logic that since Brahman is sentient and pure, and the world is insentient and impure, the world cannot be the effect of Brahman—because the effect must conform to the nature of the cause. In response to that objection, an answer was given using reasoning itself.

The point being emphasized is that mere logic (*kevala-tarka*) is not reliable, because the reasoning of one clever person can always be refuted by someone more clever. Hence, we do not formulate our conclusions based on bare logic alone.

Why so? Because Brahman, as the cause, is not something graspable by logic. The fact that logicians themselves contradict each other shows the defect in relying on mere reason. On the other hand, the *Brahmasūtra* establishes that the *Veda* consistently teaches one and the same doctrine—that is the general standpoint of the *sūtra*.

But then, what is the meaning of the *Śruti* statement that says one must also reflect (*manana*) and not just listen (*śravaṇa*)? It means that the reasoning used here is not dry, unsupported speculation, but is grounded in experience (*anubhava*). Ācārya Śaṅkara clearly states:

"*śruti-anugṛhīta eva hi-atra tarko'nubhava-aṅgatvēnāśrīyate*"

"Only reasoning that is supported by the *Śruti* and serves as an aid to direct experience is accepted."

The kind of *vaidika-tarka* (scripturally sanctioned reasoning) meant here is explained through two examples:

1. "*svapnānabuddhānayorubhayor-itaretara-vyabhichārād ātmanaḥ anasvāgatatvam, saṃprasāde ca prapañca-parityāgena sadātmanā sampatter niṣprapañcasadātmatvam*" — Because both the waking and dream states alternate with each other (each appearing in the absence of the other), it shows that neither is intrinsic to the Self (*ātman*). But in deep sleep (*suṣupti*), where the entire world is relinquished, the *jīva* becomes one with *sat* (pure Being), revealing that its true nature (svarūpa) is the non-dual, world-transcending *brahman*.

2. "*prapañcasya brahmaprabhavatvāt kāryakāraṇānanyatva-nyāyena brahmāvyatirekaḥ*" — Since the world has originated from Brahman, by the logic of non-difference between cause and effect, the world is not separate from Brahman.

Faith, Reason, and Misreading the Śruti

Ultimately, in the *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya*, Ācārya Śaṅkara seems to be addressing two types of people with distinct forms of reasoning: those who place their trust in the authority of the Veda, and those who, within Vedānta, rely solely on reasoning. Those who insist on trusting the Vedic statements at any cost often overlook their intended meaning and neglect direct experience (*anubhava*). Citing any one statement in isolation and then

arguing, “Can the Veda be false?” in order to prove a pre-decided viewpoint is, in fact, a kind of affront to the Veda itself.

For example, the mantras of the *karma-kāṇḍa* were once rightly applied in rituals like *yajña*, but now one hears the line “*sāṃgrahanyēṣṭyā yajate*”—“he performs the *sāṃgrahaṇa*[3] *iṣṭi*”—used casually during a ceremonial waving of camphor! Still, in such cases, one may find peace by viewing it as a devotional invocation of the Veda and a worship of the Lord. But when it comes to Vedānta, which speaks of things aligned with experience, merely citing scriptural sentences for the sake of citation—while rejecting all reason—is nothing but blind faith, and can never be genuine inquiry.

On the other hand, those who reject the Veda altogether and pursue arbitrary logic, neglecting the Vedāntic statements that are in harmony with lived experience, are ultimately deceiving themselves. For example, if one were to argue, “If Brahman is the cause of the world, has the entirety of Brahman become the world, or only a part of it, with the other part remaining unchanged?”—such reasoning leads nowhere. Or, “If Brahman has parts (*sāvayava*), it must be impermanent; and if it is partless (*niravayava*), it cannot become the world”—this too is such reasoning. But the *śruti* tells us that Brahman alone appears as the world.

We have already illustrated through the example of the three states (*avasthātraya dṛṣṭānta*) that in deep sleep (*suṣupti*), we abide as non-dual Brahman, and that in waking and dream states, the world appears within ourselves. Thus, to say that Brahman is the cause of the world means that the world is a transformation of Brahman—or rather, an apparent manifestation in Brahman due to *māyā*, yet not separate from Brahman.

To reject such sound reasoning, grounded in experience, is akin to discarding a powerful and reliable logic that aligns with direct experience. There was once a boy who tried to prove God’s nonexistence using a strange piece of logic he had written in a notebook and proudly showed to others. He argued: “If God exists, He must be omniscient. And if He is omniscient, He should be able to demonstrate that God does not exist. If He does demonstrate this, then it proves that God doesn’t exist. If He does not, then He cannot be omniscient—and therefore, again, God doesn’t exist!” This was his logic.

Anyone who rejects the meaning of the *śruti* and dismisses experience, and instead indulges in such dry reasoning, is no different from this boy. From the standpoint of doubt (*saṃśaya*)—which is the basis of this kind of logic—*Īśvara* remains far removed. This is because such doubt is based entirely on the waking state and constructs generalizations from a limited number of examples. We all know from experience how such reasoning lacks any stable foundation.

Therefore, it is only those who follow both the Veda—aligned with experience—and reasoning that is a limb (*aṅga*) of that experience, who truly grasp the meaning of the Veda and attain fulfillment. This is the view of the Ācārya.

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[3] In the context of the Vedic *karma-kāṇḍa*, *sāṃgrahaṇa iṣṭi* refers to a subsidiary ritual performed to collect or consolidate the various offerings (*havis*) that have been made throughout a longer ritual cycle. It's typically part of the concluding or integrating section of a yajña sequence, where the diverse components are symbolically brought together. In modern or symbolic usage (like the waving of camphor in your passage), it may be cited more loosely, often to link a simplified or symbolic act with a traditional Vedic one.

36. The Conditioned Brahman and the Unconditioned Brahman

(3-9-53)

The sūtra *janmādyasya yataḥ* does not aim to establish that the world's origin is from Brahman in a temporal or spatial sense. Instead, it conveys that the world is not separate from the Supreme Self; its appearance depends on Brahman. If we interpret the statement "The world arose from Brahman" literally, it implies that Brahman existed prior to the world. However, since the world encompasses time and space, and there is no time or space apart from the world, questions like "When was it born?" or "Where was it born?" become meaningless.

Assuming the world's birth as real leads to contradictions, akin to the futile effort of writing a horoscope for a barren woman's son. This analogy doesn't suggest that the world doesn't appear; rather, it emphasizes that the world always appears with the Self (Ātman). Without proper understanding, the world may seem independent, but upon correct experience, it's evident that the world is not different from Brahman; its essence is Brahman, as upheld by Vedantins.

When hearing that the world arises from Brahman, non-Advaitins often question whether this implies a change in Brahman or if Brahman remains unchanged while being the world's cause. Addressing this is challenging without a proper grasp of Advaita. If Brahman remains unchanged, it contradicts the typical cause-effect relationship. If Brahman changes, it implies impermanence, which contradicts its eternal nature.

Some propose that *janmādyasya yataḥ* refers not to pure Brahman but to Brahman qualified by Māyā, suggesting that Brahman is the efficient cause and Māyā the material cause. This approach attempts to reconcile Advaita with the world's causation. However, this leads to another issue: if only Brahman qualified by Māyā is to be investigated, it implies that the pure Brahman isn't the subject of inquiry, which contradicts the intention of the sūtra.

Ācārya Śaṅkara, in his commentary, clearly states that this sūtra explains Brahman, which is eternal, pure, conscious, and liberated, as the cause of the world. He consistently affirms that the non-dual, eternally pure, conscious, and liberated Paramātman is the world's cause (Su. Bh. 2-1-14, 16, 24; 26). Given that this aligns with Śruti, logic, and experience, there's no need to introduce a new interpretation involving Brahman qualified by Māyā.

The sūtra also indicates that Brahman is both the material (*upādāna-kāraṇa*) and efficient (*nimitta-kāraṇa*) cause of the world. Introducing a new process contradicts this understanding. Such debates are due to the misconception that in Vedanta Brahman as cause is stated accepting *pariṇāmavāda* (doctrine of transformation).

In a village, a young girl had heard that those possessed by a demon shake their heads. One evening, witnessing a woman undergoing an exorcism and shaking her head, the girl, out of fear or imitation, began shaking her own head. An elderly woman, aware of the

situation, instructed, "Heat the ladle in the stove; branding is the cure for demons!" Upon hearing this, the girl ceased her head-shaking immediately. This anecdote illustrates how misconceptions can be dispelled through appropriate understanding.

Similarly, in the dualistic perception of the world, the material cause is often seen to transform into the effect, leading to the belief that the world's material cause must also undergo transformation, akin to a seed becoming a tree. However, in dreams or illusions, forms appear without any transformative cause. Recognizing this repeatedly helps dispel the illusion of duality. Thus, seekers should remind themselves that Vedic cause-and-effect relationships do not rely on transformation; the scriptures aim to direct our focus toward Brahman, the ultimate cause.

Consider the story of a man with a stiff neck, causing him pain when turning it. A doctor quoted a treatment cost of a hundred rupees, which the poor man couldn't afford. As he lamented his plight to passersby, he inadvertently turned his neck more forcefully, resulting in a spontaneous cure. This story emphasizes the need to shift our focus from the cause-and-effect relationship to the Supreme Self.

Turning the Mind Toward the Supreme

In this context, we must turn the mind—which is ordinarily absorbed in cause-and-effect relationships—toward the Supreme Self (Paramātman). What is truly real is that the Paramātman, remaining exactly as He is, appears in the form of the world. This is what is known as the illusory cause-effect relationship (***māyika kārya-kāraṇa bhāva***) or the doctrine of appearance (***vivarta-vāda***). From this standpoint, Paramātman is the great magician (*mahāmāyāvī*). Let the worldly conjurors and their tricks remain; even the marvels that sages produce through austerity or deities through innate powers fade before the vast power of His Māyā.

The Upaniṣadic Story of the Gods

There is a well-known episode in the Upaniṣads: In a war between the gods and the demons, the gods attained victory through the grace of Paramātman. Unaware of His grace, they became proud, thinking, “We have won by our own strength.” In response, Paramātman appeared before them in a mysterious form, which filled them with fear. They sent forth their mightiest—Agni (fire) and Vāyu (wind)—to identify this unknown being. But they failed.

In the form of a Yakṣa, the Paramātman placed a mere blade of grass before them. Agni could not burn it, and Vāyu could not lift it. Even Indra, the king of the gods, could not perceive the truth. It was only through the grace of Umā-devī that they realized the Yakṣa was none other than the Supreme Self.

His Forms Are Mere Appearances

What does this teach us? That the Paramātman requires no material basis to assume any form. Through His own Māyā, He may manifest in any form whatsoever, without ever compromising His non-dual nature (*advitīyatva*). These forms are merely apparent, conjured by ignorance (*avidyāka*). His true nature (*paramārtha-svarūpa*) remains unchanged, untouched—this we must clearly understand.

Beyond Logic, Rooted in Revelation

The essential reality of the Paramātman is beyond imagination and cannot be grasped through logic. It must be known through the *śruti* (scripture), through the instruction of teachers who have known the truth (*tattvadarśins*), and ultimately realized through direct experience (*anubhava*).

The Illusory Distinction Between Brahman and Brahman-with-Māyā

If these two principles are understood—that Brahman appears as the world without undergoing change, and that His forms are not real but projected through Māyā—then all other doctrines, such as the view that only Brahman qualified by Māyā (*māyā-viśiṣṭa brahma*) is the cause of the world, lose their force. Such views dissolve like illusions. For apart from Brahman, the world has no independent existence.

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To further elucidate, consider the teachings of Śaṅkarācārya Bhagavatpāda. When someone is described as "the man with the red turban," it doesn't imply he didn't come if he left the turban at home. In some contexts, attributes are essential; in others, they serve merely as identifiers. Similarly, Brahman's characteristic as the cause of the universe should be understood without attaching undue significance to the attribute itself.

In certain contexts, objects are to be understood along with their upādhis (limiting adjuncts). For instance, when we say, “He donated a vessel of sacred water (*guḍodaka*),” it is understood that both the vessel and the water were donated. However, in other contexts, only the object indicated through the upādhi is to be grasped, not the upādhi itself. For example, saying, “He gave a bowl of sacred water,” implies that only the water was given, not the bowl. Similar illustrations have been discussed earlier.

Causality as an Apparent Adjunct

In the same manner, Brahman's status as the cause of the origin, sustenance, and dissolution of the world (*jagajjanmādi-kāraṇatva*) must be understood as a mere upādhi, not as intrinsic to Brahman itself.

Śaṅkara’s Clarification on Upādhis

This distinction is clarified by Ācārya Śaṅkara in the introduction to the Ānandamayādhikaraṇa. He states:

> “Thus, even the knowledge of the Self, which is the immediate cause of liberation (*sadyo-mukti-kāraṇa*), though taught with reference to specific adjuncts (*upādhi-viśeṣa*), requires, through a reflection on the structure of the sentence (*vākya-gati-paryālocanā*), a determination of whether the intended relation between the adjunct and the subject pertains to the superior (higher) or the inferior (lower) Brahman.”

Although the Supreme Self dwells in all beings, due to gradations in powers (*vibhūti*) and such, His glory is progressively revealed. Therefore, in the context of *upāsanā* (meditative worship), He is to be worshipped together with the respective adjuncts (*upādhis*); hence, in that context, the upādhis are deliberately intended (*vivakṣita*). However, this is not the case in the context of knowledge (*jñāna-vākyas*). Since the scriptures declare that

liberation occurs simultaneously with the knowledge of the true nature of the Self, even if the Self is taught through certain adjuncts, those upādhis are not intended (*avivakṣita*).

Distinguishing Upāsya and Jñeya Brahman

Therefore, we must carefully inquire and determine: where upādhis are intended, the Brahman described is the *upāsya Brahman* (Brahman to be worshipped); and where the upādhis are not intended, it is the *jñeya Brahman* (Brahman to be known). This is the view of the Ācārya. There is no doubt that the two forms spoken of—*upāsya* and *jñeya*—refer to the same one Brahman. To assert that a different Brahman is taught to worshippers would be akin to saying, “I will give you a fake gold coin,” which is deceitful.

The Role of Upādhis in Worship and Knowledge

In the context of *upāsanā*, Brahman is to be meditated upon together with name-and-form-based adjuncts (*nāma-rūpa-upādhi*); but that does not make Brahman cease to be Brahman. In the context of the *jñāna-vākyas*, Brahman must be known exactly as It is, without any upādhi. Therefore, adjuncts, which are imagined due to ignorance (*avidyā*), can never be considered intended in the context of knowledge.

An illustration may help: suppose someone sees the shadow of a person first and then turns around and recognizes the person himself. While it is true that the shadow served as a means of recognition, no one would say that the shadow is a property of the person himself. Similarly, even if an upādhi is used as an aid to know Brahman, it does not enter into Brahman’s essential nature. More than that—once Brahman is known, it becomes clear that the upādhi was a mere appearance born of ignorance.

Interpreting the Vedāntic Statement on the World's Origin

In the present context, the Vedāntic sentence describing the origin of the world says:

> “That from which these beings are born, by which they live once born, and into which they dissolve—that is what you should inquire into; that is Brahman.”

Because this statement is for the purpose of knowledge (*jñāna*), to think that the upādhi of being the cause of the world’s origin (*jagajjanmādi-kāraṇatva*) must be incorporated into the very nature of Brahman would be a mistake. Therefore, it must be understood that this is referring to *nirupādhika Brahman*—Brahman devoid of any limiting adjuncts—and that is beyond dispute.

38. Attainment of Brahman (prāpti)

(4-9-1953)

The Brahman which is the cause of the world is none other than the non-dual Brahman. The causal status mentioned in the *sūtra* does not imply any transformation in Brahman. In Vedānta, the one Brahman is described in two ways—*jñeya Brahman* (to be known) and *upāsya Brahman* (to be worshipped)—based on limiting adjuncts (*upādhi*). When speaking of *jñeya Brahman*, the adjunct is not intended (*avivakṣita*), whereas when describing *upāsya Brahman*, the attributes associated with the adjunct are necessary for meditation. Yet, it should not be misunderstood that there are two different Brahmans.

Validity of Worship Despite Mithyā Forms

One might question how those who meditate on Brahman through names and forms, which are false (mithyā), can attain results. But there is no room for such doubt. All action, agency, and results belong to the field of ignorance (*avidyā*). Just as we accept that the dream world is false and its scenes do not exist in reality, we also admit that, within the dream, actions produce tangible results—one can eat and belch, get burned by fire, and so on. Though it is all falsified upon waking, it was experienced as real in the dream.

Similarly, from the standpoint of ultimate knowledge (*tattva-jñāna*), although the world is mithyā, the connection between action, instrument, and result is experienced as real by those caught in *saṃsāra*. Here, the word "real" (*satya*) must be understood in two ways. When fire burns or a fall causes bodily pain and mental anguish, these are treated as real because they result in meaningful effects. Thus, in practical life, we treat whatever yields a purposeful outcome as real.

On the other hand, a snake seen in a rope or the mirage-water in a desert are not capable of producing effects and are thus deemed false. However, a real snake can bite and cause pain or death. Likewise, drinking water from a well quenches thirst. These are treated as real because they produce effects. Hence, in the empirical world, we define reality as that which produces meaningful results.

But Brahman, who is the Self of all, is not real in this pragmatic sense. The waking, dream, and deep sleep states rise and fall, appearing one after another. Yet the Self that witnesses all these states remains unchanged. In this sense, the Self is *satya*, and the visible world is *asatya* or *mithyā*. Therefore, there is no contradiction in saying that the worshipper attains real results while affirming that the realm of action, instrument, and result is mithyā.

The Māṇḍūkya Kārikā says:

> "*Upāsanāśrito dharmo jāte brahmaṇi vartate; prāgutpattikam sarvaṃ tenāsau kṛpaṇaḥ smṛtaḥ*"

—The being who relies on upāsanā remains in the born Brahman. Since he believes that everything existed in birthless Brahman before creation, he is considered *kṛpaṇa* (narrow-minded), say the wise.

The *Ācārya* accepts and comments on this view. The intention behind this statement is not to deny that worship yields fruit, but to show that the world of action, instrument, and result is not ultimately real. Hence, we must not think that the *Ācārya* disparages worship or karma.

Worship within the Upaniṣads

Indeed, the *Upaniṣads*, which belong to the *jñāna-kāṇḍa*, speak extensively of *upāsanā*. Not only do they state that specific fruits arise from meditation, but also that the devotee of *saguṇa Brahman* reaches Brahma-loka. According to the *Ācārya*, Brahma-loka is long-lasting. Some of us may have heard blessings like "*śāśvata-brahma-lokāvāptir astu*" (May you attain the eternal Brahma-loka).

The final *sūtra* of the Brahma Sūtras is:

> "*Anāvṛttiḥ śabdāt anāvṛttiḥ śabdāt*" (Brahma Sūtra 4.4.22)

—There is no return (from Brahma-loka), says the scripture.

While explaining this, *Ācārya* says: just as ritualists return to earth after enjoying the fruits in lunar-region (*candra-loka*), those who reach Brahma-loka do not return until the lifetime of Brahmā ends, which spans many *kalpas*. They return in the next cycle (*brahma kalpa)* unless they gain knowledge there. Those who attain equality with Brahmā (*īśvaratva*) eventually return due to the law that what is united must separate. But since Brahma-loka is a supreme realm, it is conducive to attaining *Brahma-jñāna*. Hence, those who attain knowledge there, at the time of cosmic dissolution, merge with Supreme Brahman along with Hiraṇyagarbha (*kārya brahma)*.

> "*Samyagdarśinaḥ viśvastatamasāṃ tu nityasiddha-nirvāṇa-parāyaṇānāṃ siddhavanāvṛttiḥ; tadāśrayaṇenaiva hi saguṇa-śaraṇānām apy anāvṛtti-siddhiḥ*"

—For those with true vision, who have dispelled all darkness of ignorance and are devoted to the eternally-liberated bliss-Brahman, non-return (*anāvṛtti*) is certain. Even those devoted to *saguṇa Brahman* attain this non-return by taking refuge in it.

If aspirants reflect deeply on this, they will understand that *mokṣa*, the state of non-return (*apunarāvṛtti*), is attained from one and the same Brahman—whether through worship or direct knowledge. The notion that there are two Brahmans due to adjunct-based distinctions is thereby dispelled.

Three Views on the Nature of the Self

Before concluding this topic, the *Ācārya* examines three views regarding the relationship between the *jīva* and Brahman, and how *Brahma-prāpti* (attaining Brahman) occurs.

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad says: "*ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ*" —O Maitreyī, the Self alone is to be seen, heard, reflected upon, and meditated upon.

Now, who is this Self being referred to—*vijñānātmā* (individual self) or *paramātmā* (Supreme Self)?

A prior verse says, "A husband is dear not for the sake of the husband, but for the sake of the Self," suggesting it is the *jīvātmā*. But the following verse says that knowing the Self means knowing all, suggesting the *paramātmā*.

To resolve this, Bādarāyaṇa offers three views in the *Brahma Sūtras*.

1. **Bhedābheda view** — "*Pratijñāsiddher liṅgamaścarathyasya*" (Brahma Sūtra 1.4.20): Since the individual soul (*jīva*) cannot be separate from Brahman—else knowing Brahman wouldn't imply knowing everything—there is both difference and non-difference between them. This view is taught by Āśmarathya.
2. **Bheda view** — "*Upamardāt evambhāvaḥ iti Audulomiḥ*" (Brahma Sūtra 1.4.21): The jīva is different due to association with body, senses, and intellect, and must be purified by practice before attaining Brahman. This is the view of Audulomi.
3. **Abheda view** – The third view, that of non-difference (*abheda*), is upheld by the Ācārya as the supreme conclusion (*parama-siddhānta*). According to this view, taught by ācārya Kāśakṛtsna, the Paramātman enters all beings (*jīvarūpa praveśa*) and distinguishes the names and forms (*nāmarūpa vyākarana*), appearing as the

jīva. The Śruti declares, “That Sat-Brahman, you are”—thereby teaching the essential non-duality of the Self. According to this position, it is only due to ignorance that there appears to be a difference between jīva and Paramātman; in reality, no such ontological difference exists.

This last view is Ācārya’s doctrine. Paramātman is eternal, pure, and of the form of knowledge and liberation (*nitya śuddha buddha mukta).* This view is likened to the space within a pot (*ghaṭākāśa*) being none other than the universal space (*mahākāśa*) from a higher standpoint. The true nature of the Self is to be understood through Vedāntic reasoning in accordance with the teachings of the Upaniṣads. To realize this, a purified mind (*antahkarana samsāra)* is essential; no particular mystical experiences or blind beliefs are necessary.

Role of the Other Doctrines

Even so, one cannot say Ācārya dismisses the previous two positions. While those who follow the path of meditation (*upāsanā*) may not fully embrace knowledge, those who pursue knowledge do not reject meditation. For those of middling or lower qualifications, both karma and upāsanā are necessary disciplines. The Śruti says, “Having become a god, he attains (the world of) the gods (*devo bhūtva devān apyetī)*.” Therefore, consistent and devoted meditation can result in the meditative realization (*sāksatkāra)* of the Lord and merger with the Lord after death.

However, for one who has the required maturity and capacity for inquiry, what prevents them from realizing Paramātman here and now? It is like saying, “I will show you the ornament on my own forehead after crossing the river.” Even so, those unable to perform deep inquiry should at least engage in meditation. Better to revolve in happiness by meditating on Paramātman than to suffer by brooding over worldly objects. Not everyone is qualified for Vedāntic inquiry. In the Śruti, the *tat tvam asi* teaching is given by Uddālaka to his son Śvetaketu—who had already studied under many teachers and yet had not realized the truth. He asks the son, “Oh Švētaketu, since you are so highly conceited and immodest regarding yourself as a great scholar, have you acquired from your teacher of that teaching knowing which everything is known?” and the son, not having learnt that, pleads with his father for that instruction. Only when his father gave him the teaching through appropriate reasoning did he come to understand. If even the son of a Brahma-jñānī like Uddālaka struggled, how much more so for the modern man immersed in indulgence and devoid of śraddhā? For rare individuals, the truth may dawn through mere instruction. But many are not even eligible for meditation. To keep the mind fixed on Paramātman with single-pointed devotion is itself a rare and great merit.

The Value of Upāsanā

The Ācārya composed his bhāṣya on the *upāsanā-vākya*-s with as much reverence as he did on the *jñāna-vākya*-s. Therefore, as followers of Śaṅkara, we must never regard upāsanā as beneath our dignity. To do so is to drift away from the truth.

Even the view of difference-cum-non-difference (*bhedābheda*) can be admitted from the standpoint of the Ācārya in a certain way: from the perspective of true knowledge (*jñāna*), Paramātman alone is the Self of the jīva. However, so long as ignorance remains, there will appear to be a difference between the two. The Lord, while instructing Arjuna, began from karma-yoga and progressed through saguṇa-upāsanā—introducing bhēda

(difference) for the sake of the disciple's readiness. The Ācārya says that the Lord did so for Arjuna's welfare. If even Arjuna required such graded instruction, what of us?

We must admit with humility that we are neither highly qualified (*uttama-adhikārī*) nor diligently practicing the required disciplines. We have not developed the inner maturity to realize the Advaitic truth the Ācārya has taught. We have not sincerely pursued the fourfold qualifications (*sādhana-catuṣṭaya*) necessary to make ourselves fit. We assert that both bheda and abheda are equally true! When told, "You are not truly qualified," people often retort, "This is just an excuse to deny us the truth." But without patience or subtle intellect, who can give it to us?

To one who is still sweeping garbage, is it kind to deny them instructions on the means to rise higher, or is it kind to say, "Don't do this anymore, everyone else is sitting higher, why don't you?" The wise will see which is truly compassionate. Like teaching a child to first digest milk before rice, and rice before rich food—real teachers guide according to the aspirant's stage. To feed a child food it cannot digest is not kindness.

We must recognize the root cause of our disinterest in inquiry: our lack of preparation. This is why the Brahmasūtra begins with the word *atha*, implying the prior completion of the *sādhana-catuṣṭaya*. One must gain this eligibility step by step and become fulfilled. Only such seekers are the true aspirants of Vedānta.

Let us pray that the Lord grants us the inner inclination to pursue the disciplines appropriate to our own current level.

38. Avasthatraya Prakriya - Suśupti (Deep Sleep)

(5-9-53)

Having considered the doctrine of *Brahman* as the cause of the universe, as established in the *Brahma Sūtras*, we now turn to the treatment of the *avasthātraya prakriyā*—the analysis of the three states of consciousness—within that text.

In all the *Upaniṣads*, it is unequivocally declared that in *suṣupti* (deep sleep), the *jīva* (individual self) becomes one with the *Paramātman* (Supreme Self). Nowhere in *śruti* do we find a teaching that *avidyā* (ignorance) persists in *suṣupti*. Rather, the consistent experience is that "nothing is seen, nothing is heard, nothing is known." The question arises: What is the reason for this absence of cognition?

Some modern interpreters of Śaṅkara propose that a so-called *bhāvāvidyā* (a positive, existing ignorance) veils the *jīva*. But the *śruti* offers no support for this view. Instead, it states:
na tu tadvitīyam asti tato'nyad vibhaktaṁ yat paśyet (Bṛh. 4.3.23)
"There is nothing separate from the Self there—if there were, would he not see it?"

This *śruti* makes it clear that the absence of duality is the reason for non-perception in *suṣupti*, as was discussed earlier.

The Role of Deep Sleep in the Brahma Sūtras

Let us now examine how the *Brahma Sūtras* approach this topic. In the fifth *adhikaraṇa* of the first chapter, the *sūtrakāra* considers the scriptural statement:
sadeva somyedamagra āsīt (Chāndogya Up. 6.2.1)
"O Somya, in the beginning this was Existence alone, one without a second."

A doubt arises: Does this "*sat*" (Existence) refer to *Brahman* or to *Pradhāna*, the primordial matter of the Sāṅkhya system?

According to Sāṅkhyas, *Pradhāna* is the root cause from which emerge successive evolutes like *mahat* (intellect) and *ahaṅkāra* (ego). But according to Vedānta, *sat* refers to *Brahman*, from whom arise the five great elements and all beings. The context of the passage supports the Vedāntic view: it speaks of *sat* thinking, being called the Self, and serving as the ground of liberation. If *Pradhāna* were meant, a different soteriology would have to be introduced—yet no such view is found in *śruti*.

Hence, the *siddhāntin* affirms that *sat* here is indeed *Brahman*. Immediately following this conclusion, the *sūtra* 1.1.9—*svāpyayāt*—is introduced.

The Meaning of Svāpyayāt (1.1.9)

What is the significance of this *sūtra*?

The term *svapiti*—"he sleeps"—is derived from *svāpyaya*, meaning "merging into one's own self." The *śruti* teaches that the *jīva*, in deep sleep, merges into *sat*, the ground of Being. Since *Pradhāna* is inert, it cannot be regarded as the *jīva*'s own nature (*sva*), nor can one meaningfully say that the conscious *jīva* merges into the unconscious *Pradhāna*. Therefore, the only meaningful interpretation is that the *jīva* returns to its true nature—*Brahman*—in deep sleep. This merging is not a destruction but a cessation of adjunct-based distinctions.

Śaṅkara writes in this context:
sa upādhi-dvaya-uparamē suṣuptāvasthāyām upādhi-kṛta-viśeṣābhāvāt svātmani pralīna iva iti; svaṁ hy apīto bhavatīti ucyate
"When the two upādhis (gross and subtle bodies) cease in the state of deep sleep, and distinctions caused by adjuncts are absent, the *jīva* appears to be merged into its own Self. Therefore, it is said that he attains his own Self."

Thus, in *suṣupti*, there is no perception not because of the presence of ignorance but because of the absence of duality.

Refuting the Notion of Avidyā in Deep Sleep

We must now turn to a crucial clarification regarding *suṣupti* (deep sleep): it has been explicitly stated that no *upādhi* (limiting adjunct) exists for the *jīva* in deep sleep. Yet, some modern commentators, deviating from both *śruti* and *bhāṣya*, argue that since *avidyā* (ignorance) persists as an *upādhi* in deep sleep, the union of *jīva* and *Brahman* cannot be accepted—and if it were accepted, they claim, it would entail connecting *avidyā* to *Brahman* itself. To support this, they point to the bhāṣya phrase *svātmani pralīna iva* ("as if merged in one's own Self") and interpret it as suggesting partial or apparent merger: "Because the projective power of *avidyā* has subsided, he is *as if* merged in *Brahman*; but since the veiling power remains, he is still not fully merged."

This interpretive effort is futile. Śaṅkara, commenting on the *sūtra tadabhāvo nāḍīṣu tacchruterātmani ca* (3.2.7), clearly states that the *jīva* merges into *Brahman* in deep sleep. We must pay particular attention to the following passage from that bhāṣya:

> *api ca na kadācij jīvasya brahmaṇā sampattir nāsti svarūpasy anapāyitvāt | svapna-jāgaritayor tūpādhi-samparka-vaśāt para-rūpāpatim ivāpekṣya tad-upaśamāt suṣupte svarūpa-aparavakṣyate | ataś ca suṣuptāvasthāyāṁ kadācit satā sampadyate kadācin na sampadyata iti ayuktam.*

"Moreover, there is never a time when the *jīva* does not attain union with *Brahman*, because his essential nature is inalienable. In the states of dream and waking, due to contact with the *upādhi*, the *jīva* appears to take on a different form. But with the cessation of *upādhi* in *suṣupti*, he attains his essential nature. Hence, it is incorrect to say that sometimes he merges with *sat* and sometimes does not."

The meaning of this passage is luminous and undeniable: since the *jīva's* essential nature is *Brahman*, and since the essential never departs, there is no moment when the *jīva* is not in union with *Brahman*. However, due to the temporary assumption of a different appearance caused by *upādhis* in waking and dream, the disappearance of those *upādhis* in *suṣupti* is described as the attainment of one's own Self. Thus, to speak of "partial merger" in *suṣupti* is fundamentally misguided. There is no trace here of *avidyā* persisting in deep sleep. On the contrary, it is declared with the finality of a bell ringing: there is no *upādhi* in *Brahman*.

A Clear Statement from Śaṅkara on the Absence of Avidyā

Furthermore, Śaṅkara continues in the same commentary, explaining the *absence of awareness* in deep sleep as follows:

> *upādher upaśāntatvāt satā sampanno na vijānāti iti yuktam.*

"Because the *upādhi* has subsided, he has become one with *sat*; hence, it is appropriate that he does not know anything."

Where then is the scope for arguing that *avidyā* is the cause of non-cognition in *suṣupti*?

Ajātaśatru's Teaching and the Vedāntic Position

Let us now turn to another *sūtra* (1.4.18) and its *bhāṣya*, which refer to the conversation in the Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad between the brāhmaṇa Bālāki and the king Ajātaśatru. Bālāki, proposing that various *puruṣas* dwelling in the sun, moon, etc., are *Brahman*, concludes that *prāṇa* is the true *Brahman*. The king, dismissing Bālāki's view, seeks to teach the higher *Brahman*.

He awakens a sleeping man and asks Bālāki, *"Where was this person sleeping? From where did he return?"* Bālāki has no answer. The king responds: when one sleeps dreamlessly, he abides in the Self—from which all things, including *prāṇa* and the world, arise.

Śaṅkara writes in his commentary:

suṣuptikāle ca pareṇa brahmaṇā jīva ekatāṁ gacchati | parasmāc ca brahmaṇaḥ prāṇādikaṁ jagat jāyata iti vedānta maryādā.

"In the state of deep sleep, the *jīva* becomes one with the Supreme *Brahman*. From that same *Brahman*, *prāṇa* and the world originate—this is the doctrine of Vedānta."

Here too, any notion of separation between *jīva* and *Brahman* is rejected. The division arises only due to *avidyā* in waking and dream. Śaṅkara further writes:

tasmād yatrāsya jīvasya niḥsaṁbodhatā-svacchatā-rūpaḥ svāpaḥ, upādhi-janita-viśeṣa-jñāna-rahitaṁ svarūpam, yataḥ taṁ svarūpam āgamanaṁ, so'tra paramātmā veditavyatayā śrāvita iti gamyate.

"In that Supreme Self, where the *jīva*'s sleep is of the form of pure, unknowing clarity—devoid of any knowledge shaped by *upādhi*—and from which he emerges, it is that Supreme Self which is pointed out in the *śruti* as the object of realization."

Refuting Modern Reinterpretations

Modern reinterpretations of this passage are wholly unsatisfactory. Some commentators twist this clear teaching into "He has a kind of purity—*as if* pure like a liberated soul," and claim that real purity is absent because *laya* (dissolution) and distraction remain. What is one to say to this? Even if the Supreme grants a boon, such an interpreter would refuse to bestow it!

Not only is the *bhāṣya*'s assertion of identity with *Brahman* dismissed, but Bādarāyaṇa's own doctrinal intention—identifying the *paramātman* in the *vedya-vākya* (declarative sentence)—is also lost. This alone is cause for sorrow.

Conclusion: The Sleeping Self Is the Supreme Self

In support of Śaṅkara's reading, the *Brhadāraṇyaka* passage cited by both *sūtrakāra* and *bhāṣyakāra* is:

ya eṣo'ntar hṛdaya ākāśaḥ saḥ śete (Brh. 2.1.17)

"He sleeps in the space within the heart."

And Śaṅkara comments:

ākāśa-śabdena para eva sva ācyate | tasmin sve ātmany ākāśe śete svābhāvike asaṁsārike.

"By the word *ākāśa*, the Supreme Self is indicated. In that Supreme, natural, and non-transmigratory Self, he sleeps."

What clearer statement could there be?

Resolution of Objections Concerning Deep Sleep and Liberation

Having established that the *jīva* becomes one with the Supreme Self (*Paramātman*) in *suṣupti* (deep sleep) and re-emerges from the same upon awakening, the *sūtra* and *bhāṣya* raise a pertinent objection (*pūrvapakṣa*): If true union with *Brahman* occurs in deep

sleep, why does liberation (*mokṣa*) not result automatically? Why does the *jīva*, like a drop of water merged in the ocean, reappear and re-enter *saṃsāra*?

Śaṅkara offers several responses to this question. Though we cannot explore them all here, two crucial statements from the *bhāṣya* on *Sūtra* 3.2.9 are illuminating:

> *iha tu vidyate vivekakāraṇaṁ karma cāvidyā ca iti vaiṣamyam*
> "Here (in the case of the *jīva*), there exist distinguishing causes—namely *karma* and *avidyā*. A drop of water merged into the ocean has no such causes."

This clarifies that the distinction between *jīva* and *Brahman* is due to *upādhi*-based factors—*karma* and *avidyā*—which are absent in the case of a water drop. Hence, the *jīva* continues to experience re-embodiment.

Further:

> *sadeva tūpādhi-samparkāt jīva ityupacaryate ityasakṛt pañcitam | evaṁ sati yāvat ekopy upādhigatā bandhān vṛttis tāvad eka-jīva-vyavahāraḥ — sa evāyam upādhiḥ svāpa-prabodhayor bīja-aṅkura-nyāyena iti ataḥ sa eva jīvaḥ pratibudhyate iti yuktam*

"It has been repeatedly explained that Brahman itself is figuratively called *jīva* due to its contact with the *upādhi*. As long as the same *upādhi* persists, bondage continues, and the same *jīva* is referred to in both deep sleep and waking, just as a seed and sprout represent two states of the same entity. Therefore, it is proper to say that the very same *jīva* awakens after sleep."

Clarifying the Role of Avidyā and Buddhi

Because this passage mentions *avidyā* among the causes of reappearance, some interpreters have erroneously concluded that *avidyā* continues in *suṣupti*. But since Śaṅkara mentions both *karma* and *avidyā* and considering that *karma* clearly does not operate in deep sleep, it is improper to assume that *avidyā* exists there in the same active sense. The sentence is metaphorical, pointing to the continuity of the *upādhi*, not its activity.

The natural question then arises: If *avidyā* is not the *upādhi* that persists, what is?

Śaṅkara answers directly:

> *paramārthatas tu na jīvo nāma*
> *buddhy-upādhi-sambandha-parikalpita-svarūpa-vyatirekeṇa asti*
> "From the standpoint of the highest truth, there is no such thing as a *jīva* apart from the *Paramātman*; it is merely a construct based on association with the *buddhi* (intellect) as *upādhi*."

And how does this association arise?

> *mithyājñāna-puraḥsaraḥ ayam ātmanaḥ buddhy-upādhi-sambandhaḥ*
> "This relationship with the *buddhi* arises from false knowledge (*mithyājñāna*)."

This false association, existing in seed form even during *suṣupti* and cosmic dissolution (*pralaya*), manifests again upon waking:

> *ayam api buddhi-sambandhaḥ śakty-ātmanā vidyamāna eva*
> *suṣupta-pralayayoḥ punaḥ prabodha-prasavayoḥ āvirbhavati*
> "This connection with *buddhi*, though latent in deep sleep and dissolution, reappears upon waking."

Thus, in *suṣupti* there is no experience of the world; in *jāgrat* (waking), the world with its differentiated objects reappears—its source being *avidyā*. If this *avidyā* were intrinsic to the Self, it could never be eliminated. The truth is that the Self is untouched by the three states (*avasthātraya*) and by *avidyā*.

To express this insight, Śrī Gauḍapāda declares in his *Kārikā*:

> *anādimāyayā supto yadā jīvaḥ prabudhyate |*
> *ajam anidram asvapnam advaitaṁ budhyate tadā* (Gau. Kā. 1.16)

"This *jīva*, asleep under beginningless *māyā*, upon awakening through true knowledge, realizes himself as unborn (*aja*), sleepless (*anidra*), without dreams (*asvapna*), and non-dual (*advaita*)."

The Nature of Union (Sampatti) in Suṣupti

To complete the analysis of *suṣupti*, we cite the *Chāndogya Śruti*:

> *satā somya tadā sampanno bhavati* (Ch. 6.8.1)
> "O Somya, in that state, he becomes one with *sat* (Being)."

What is the nature of this *sampatti* (attainment)? It is not *samyoga-sambandha* (conjunction, as when one object newly joins another), nor is it *samavāya-sambandha* (inherent relation, as between substance and quality). Śaṅkara clarifies this in the *bhāṣya* on *Sūtra* 3.2.34:

> *buddhy-upādhi-sthāna-viśeṣa-yogād udayasya viśeṣa-vijñānasya*
> *upādhi-upaśame ya upaśamaḥ sa paramātmanā sambandhaḥ iti*
> *upādhi-apekṣayā upacaryate, na parimita-tvāpēkṣayā*
>
> "Due to the *upādhi* of the *buddhi*, differentiated knowledge arises. When that *upādhi* subsides, the cessation itself is figuratively called a 'relation' with the *Paramātman*, not because the *jīva* is finite, but merely for the sake of instruction."

Thus, Śaṅkara states that all *upādhis* subside in *suṣupti*, and the union with the *Paramātman* is not a real change or a new event, but a recognition of what already is.

And yet, some interpreters continue to insist that the *avidyā-upādhi* persists in deep sleep—establishing a novel doctrine contrary to the bhāṣya. Those who seek truth must reflect on this carefully.

Even when the term *upaśama* (cessation) is used, some argue that the *upādhi* is not fully dissolved but only temporarily dormant (*unmanifest*). Since the relationship with the *upādhi*

arises from *mithyājñāna*, they hold that it remains until true knowledge (*jñāna*) dawns. This may be granted.

But the crucial question remains: Is the *jīva* ultimately distinct from the *Paramātman*?

On the Absence of Upādhi in Deep Sleep: Clarifying the Bhāṣya

To contemplate thus is to prepare the mind for Self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*). Therefore, even if *avidyā* appears to exist in *suṣupti* (deep sleep) from the deluded standpoint of the worldly intellect, it does not exist from the standpoint of *śruti* (scripture). In fact, while examining *suṣupti*, it is never appropriate to assert the continued presence of an *upādhi* or *avidyā*. To emphasize this, the commentator clearly states in the next *sūtra*:

> *"svam apīto bhavati iti svarūpa-sambaddham enam āmananti | svarūpasya cānapāyitvāt na nara-nagara-nyāyena sambandho bhavati | upādhi-kṛta-svarūpa-tirobhāvāt tu svam apīto bhavati ity upapadyate"*
> "The statement 'he merges into his own Self' is an affirmation of the Self's intrinsic nature. Since that nature is never lost, the relationship is not like a man walking into a city. Rather, the sense of merging arises because the *upādhi*-caused obscuration of the true nature disappears."

Deep Sleep and Samādhi: No Essential Difference

According to the *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya*, the conclusion regarding *suṣupti* is that there is no *upādhi* present there, and the *jīva* truly becomes one with *Brahman*. Therefore, there is no essential difference between *suṣupti* and *samādhi*; in both states, from the standpoint of ultimate reality (*paramārthika satya*), the *jīva* abides in unity with the *Paramātman*.

From the standpoint of the ignorant, however, *avidyā* is projected as if it persists. Some interpret Gaudapāda as distinguishing *suṣupti* from *samādhi*, thereby implying a doctrinal difference between him and Śaṅkara. But this is a misunderstanding. Their views are in perfect agreement. The perceived divergence arises not from their teachings but from our own misapprehension.

Numerous *bhāṣya* passages across the *Prasthāna-traya* affirm the unity of the *Sūtra* and *Upaniṣad* traditions concerning *suṣupti*. For one familiar with the method of the *bhāṣya*, this harmony is self-evident. But for those less accustomed to its study, doubts may arise: "Can everyone with discriminative power recognize whether Śaṅkara's doctrine is unanimously supported here or not?"

No Real Relation Between Self and Non-Self

The apparent relation between the Self (*ātman*), the witness (*sākṣin*), and the non-Self—intellect, senses, body—is not a real relation. This is in full accord with our actual experience. Moreover, the absence of *upādhi* in *suṣupti* is not merely scriptural—it is experientially verifiable. Everyone who sincerely contemplates in accordance with experience (*anubhava-anusandhāna*) will arrive at the non-dual conclusion that the Self alone is real.

But it is a mistake to claim that we *become* Brahman in *suṣupti*. Animals, birds, and even insects experience *suṣupti*, yet they do not attain liberation through it. Why? Because

Brahmatva (the nature of Brahman) is not something that must be acquired—it is our eternal nature. As the *avadhūta-s* declare:

> "If you say 'Fire!' I will enter—
> You are Brahman even now."

But merely being Brahman does not grant fulfillment. Liberation is attained only through the clear and certain knowledge (*jñāna*) that "I am the non-dual Self."

The Distinction Between Sleep and Knowledge

We are fulfilled by the knowledge that "I am the non-dual Self," not by *suṣupti* alone. This is why Gauḍapāda asserts a difference between the state of deep sleep and the state of realization. Madmen awaken from *suṣupti* still mad. But when the knowledge arises—"I am Brahman, untouched by the three states"—then, regardless of age, gender, or education, one becomes a *jñānī*.

The belief that "I possess states" is itself *avidyā*, a dream-like sleep. But the direct insight, "I am the eternal, stainless Self, without any state," is *vidyā-samādhi*. Through that *vidyā*, one realizes the Self as *ānanda-svarūpa*—eternal bliss itself.

To reiterate: the supposed relation between the Self and non-Self adjuncts like *buddhi* (intellect), body, or senses is not a real relation. This conforms not only to scriptural teaching but also to a well-considered analysis of our own experience.

39. Avasthatrayaprakriya - Dream

(6-9-53)

Clarifying the Role of the Three States (Avasthātraya) in Śaṅkara's Works

First, it's essential to dispel the misconception that there is a difference in the *avasthātraya-prakriyā* (the process of the three states) between the *Sūtra Bhāṣya* and the *Upaniṣad Bhāṣyas*. As we discussed yesterday regarding *suṣupti* (deep sleep), both *prasthānas* (approaches) share the same understanding: in *suṣupti*, we know nothing, and we superimpose ignorance based on our waking intellect. The reason for this non-knowing is that all *upādhis* (limiting adjuncts) are shed, and the jīva becomes one with the *Paramātman*. In truth, we are always one with the *Paramātman*—this is the philosophical insight derived from the analysis of *suṣupti*.

Misconceptions Regarding Dream State

Yet, equally persistent misconceptions arise concerning the dream state. A major misunderstanding is that the *Sūtra Bhāṣya*, while refuting the Buddhists, affirms a difference between dream and waking states, whereas the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā Bhāṣya* maintains their similarity, asserting that waking is as unreal as a dream. To understand the actual position, we must carefully consider the context of the *Sūtra Bhāṣya's* arguments.

In the *Sūtra Bhāṣya*, the Self is primarily presented as the non-dual *Brahman*, and the *Vedānta* statements are examined to demonstrate that there is no world apart from this Self. The *sūtra* "*janmādyasya yataḥ*" is employed to convey the defining characteristic of *Brahman*. Setting aside Śaṅkara's conclusion that non-dual *Brahman* is established by scripture, the *Sāṅkhyas* and other thinkers argued that *Brahman* is already known and can

be validated by other means of knowledge. They tried to align the *Vedānta* statements with their respective doctrines, claiming that their *pradhāna* (primordial matter) is the true cause referred to in the *Vedānta*. These interpretations had to be refuted.

Context of Refutation: Why Dreams Are Discussed

Śaṅkara establishes his own *siddhānta* (doctrine) and critiques the interpretations of others—even when those interpretations are internally logical—because they deviate from the *Vedānta śruti*. Therefore, to respond to such objections, the context necessitates refuting the doctrines of *Sāṅkhyas*, *Vaiśeṣikas*, and Buddhists using their own assumptions. This includes the Buddhist view, which is particularly relevant to the discussion of dreams.

Refuting the Idealist Buddhist View

The *Vijñānavāda* (idealist) Buddhists did not assert belief in external objects. But for the sake of instructing less capable disciples, they sometimes proposed that external objects were momentary. Thus, refuting external-object realism does not amount to refuting the core Buddhist view. The true *Saugata* (Buddhist) view claims that only the *vijñāna-skandha* (aggregate of consciousness) is real. All knowledge transactions (*pramāṇa* and *prameya*) occur within this stream of consciousness (*vijñāna)*, eliminating the need to postulate external objects. Since no object can be known apart from consciousness, they propose that what appears as an object is just a modification or appearance of consciousness itself. This lends *lāghava* (economy or simplicity) to their view.

Since knowledge and its object appear simultaneously, it's inappropriate to assume a separation between them. Both Advaitins and Buddhists acknowledge that dream imagery, illusions, mirage water, or *gandharva-nagara* (celestial cities) exhibit a *grāhya-grāhaka-bhāva* (knower-known relationship) without needing external referents. Extending this reasoning, the Buddhist claims that even objects like pillars seen in waking life have no external existence. Instead, they are appearances arising from *vāsanās* (latent impressions) accumulated in beginningless *saṃsāra*. These *vāsanās* are sufficient to project an apparent external world, just as they do in dreams. Consequently, Buddhists conclude that consciousness (*vijñāna*) alone is the reality (*tattva*), and all else—including the perceived world—arises from the latent impressions (*vijñāna vāsana)* embedded in that consciousness.

Śaṅkara’s Response to the Vijñānavāda Position

In the Buddhist argument, only *vijñāna* (consciousness) is admitted. Unlike the logicians (*nāyāyikas*), Buddhists do not accept any distinction between knowledge and external object. According to logicians, knowledge like “this is a conch shell” is valid (*yathārtha*) if it corresponds to a real external object. But if one mistakes a conch shell for silver, then such cognition is false. Thus, the logicians depend on an external *viśeṣaṇa-viśeṣya* structure to distinguish true from false cognition.

Śaṅkara criticizes the Buddhist view because it undermines worldly transactions and obstructs both the performance of *karma* and reflection on *tattva*. In Śaṅkara’s view, experiential distinctions between knowledge and object must be accepted in empirical life. Only from the standpoint of *paramārtha* are both knowledge and object sublated into the witness-consciousness (*sākṣī-ātman*), which alone remains.

Therefore, in refuting the Buddhists, Śaṅkara reasserts the validity of empirical duality (*vyavahāra*) while maintaining *advaita* in the ultimate sense. Since both knowledge and object appear distinct in daily life, it is improper to negate their experienced distinction solely through logic.

The Case of Dreams: Advaita's Nuanced View

Now, regarding dreams: both Advaitins and Buddhists accept that in dreams, perceptions arise in a subject-object form without external objects. However, Śaṅkara argues that dreams are sublated, remembered upon waking, and thus revealed to be false. Waking experience, by contrast, is never sublated by any other state and belongs to immediate awareness, not to memory. Therefore, the inference that waking is also objectless, like dreams, is a faulty inference—similar to saying "fire is cold because it is a substance like water."

Thus, Śaṅkara refutes *Vijñānavāda* not just by scripture but through experiential distinction. The Buddhist has no valid reply to this argument, and hence, the refutation stands.

Reconciling Dream as Illusion in Advaita

Then how can Advaitins still claim that waking is like a dream? Because the analogy is drawn only after establishing that dreams are illusory based on shared criteria. As the *Sūtra Bhāṣya* explains: dreams lack sufficient space, time, causal order, and are regularly sublated upon waking. Within moments, one dreams of traveling far, seeing forests, mountains, and elephants. Effects occur without corresponding causes. Upon waking, one realizes: "It was just a dream; I didn't truly go or do anything." All these point to falsity.

Having demonstrated this, Śaṅkara concludes:

> "*na ca viyadādisargasyāpyātyantikaṃ satyatvamasti | pratipāditaṃ hi tadananyatvamārambhaṇaśabdādibhyaḥ ityatra samastasya prapañcasya māyāmātratvam | prāk brahmātmatvadarśanād viyadādiprapañco vyavasthitarūpo bhavati | saṃdhyāśrayastu prapañcaḥ pratidinaṃ bādhyata iti | ato vaiśeṣikamidaṃ saṃdhyasva māyāmātratvamuditam"*
>
> "Even the creation of space and the elements is not ultimately real. As established in the sūtra 't*adananyatvamārambhaṇaśabdādibhyaḥ*', the entire world is only a product of *māyā (māyāmātra)*. Before the realization of one's *Brahma-ātma* identity, the world including space and the rest appears in a fixed form. But the dream world is negated daily. Hence, from this special standpoint, the dream is termed illusion (*māyāmātra)*."

Those who understand this passage properly will see no contradiction in Śaṅkara's thought. Dreams may be viewed in two ways: either from the waking standpoint, or from the standpoint of the Self (*ātman*) itself.

It is a mistake to assume that dream and waking have equal reality. To illustrate this point, consider an analogy: if a government were to enforce equality by reducing all citizens—regardless of virtue, education, or wealth—to the lowest common denominator, claiming it as fairness, we would immediately see the absurdity. Likewise, the Buddhist

claim that waking is no more real than dreaming amounts to a philosophical levelling that ignores experiential gradation.

Śaṅkara therefore defends the higher reality of waking for the purpose of *vyavahāra* (transactional life), while also affirming the dream state to be illusory. But this does not imply any disagreement between Śaṅkara and his paramaguru, Gauḍapāda. For Gauḍapāda too acknowledges that both waking and dream are equally false from the vantage point of the *Ātman*. The *grāhya-grāhaka-prapañca* (subject-object structure) that characterizes both states is mutually exclusive—each has its own distinct time, place, and causality—thus both are ultimately unreal in the light of nonduality.

Clarifying the Illusion of Wakefulness

Some question whether Śaṅkara's acceptance of waking's falsity (*mithyā*) aligns him with the Buddhists. They argue, it is like a mother-in-law telling (the one seeking alms) "the daughter-in-law has no authority to tell you that there are no alms, because I am the one in charge of the house." In other words, it is like a non-discriminating person saying, a buddhist says the waking is *mithyā*, and so does Ācārya; there is no difference between the two! But this misses the essential distinction. Śaṅkara's teaching accepts the reality of the waking state within its own empirical framework. As the *pramātā* (experiencer), one engages in knowing, acting, and achieving results—that very framework underpins ethics, empirical science, and all domains of life.

Buddhism, by undermining this framework, becomes incompatible with lived experience. Advaita, in contrast, affirms the validity of waking for all practical purposes. The *Ātman*, as the witness, remains untouched by either waking or dream; neither domain exists independently of it. Thus, while both states are considered *mithyā* (illusory) from the absolute standpoint (*pāramartha*), this recognition does not disrupt their functional utility. The claim is not that waking experience does not occur, but rather that it does not possess absolute, independent reality apart from the *Ātman*.

The Acharya's Unique Synthesis

This non-dual perspective does not dissolve hierarchies or practical distinctions. Śaṅkara's brilliance lies in his capacity to maintain all transactional distinctions and hierarchies—acknowledging that waking is experientially superior to dreaming—while ultimately declaring that both are non-separate from Brahman. In this way, his teaching preserves the coherence of practical life and yet reveals the substratum of unity beneath apparent multiplicity.

Liberated Will and Scriptural Authority

A powerful illustration of this principle appears in the *Daharavidyā*. According to the scriptures, those who realize Brahman within the heart gain divine sovereignty: their desires—whether to see departed relatives or to enjoy specific experiences—are fulfilled merely by their *saṅkalpa* (resolve or will). The *pūrvapakṣin* (objector) contends that mere resolve cannot yield results without instruments.

Śaṅkara, however, replies that such objections are misplaced. The liberated one's will is not ordinary. As the *Bhāṣya* on *Brahmasūtra 4.4.8* states: "*saṅkalpabalādeva caiṣāṃ sthairyopapattiḥ prākṛtasaṅkalpavilakṣaṇatvānuktasaṅkalpasya*"—"The resolve of the liberated is unlike that of ordinary beings; their strength of their resolve lets those objects

be stable until their use, and since they are unlike imagined mental objects." Even if one assumes an unseen mechanism, the will itself remains causally efficacious, lest scriptural authority be rendered void.

Conclusion: Harmony Between Nonduality (*paramārthika*) and Transactions (*vyāvahārika)*

If one were to think that Śrī Śaṅkara, being a staunch non-dualist, will not accept any differences so even in vyavahāra one must take recourse to *kriyā-advaita* (harmonizing non-duality with rituals); such a position will not be acceptable to Ācārya, and we should not forget that. He accepts the truth in their own respective domains: *paramārthika* (absolute), *vyāvahārika* (transactional), and *prātibhāsika* (apparent). This is in keeping with the scriptural statement: *satyam ca anṛtam ca satyam abhavat*—"Brahman the absolute truth (*paramārthika Satya)* is both the empirical truth and untruth (*vyāvahārika satya)*."

40. Summary of the Consideration of the Three States

(7-9-53)

To complete the *Sūtraprasthāna*, it is necessary to conclude our discussion of the *avasthātraya-prakriyā*—the analysis of the three states of experience. Yesterday, we considered the nature of the dream (*svapna*) state. From the vantage point of waking (*jāgrat*), the dream appears to have a lesser degree of reality, and waking seems more substantial. Yet, however wise or learned a person may be, in the midst of a dream, one is captivated by its contents and experiences.

One is compelled, by the very nature of experience, to consider the dream as real while dreaming. There is a humorous story of a scholar named Johnson who, in a dream, was defeated in a debate and felt deeply humiliated. On waking, he tried to console himself by thinking, "There was no one else in the dream besides me—so even the opponent was myself. Hence, I was the victor!" Likewise, a doctor may diagnose an illness in a dream and take pride in discovering its root cause. But if upon waking he realizes that his patient and diagnosis both belonged to the dream, would he not be embarrassed by his own folly?

All such experiences—whether waking or dreaming—appear real in their own respective states. Upon transitioning from one state to another, we may label the previous as false, but in its own moment, it was undeniably true to us. Indeed, this is the nature of all error: it masquerades as truth until corrected.

All Three States Are Transitory and Illusory

Waking and dreaming are perpetually alternating—both part of a grand illusion (*māyā*). In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, when King Nimi asks about the nature of *Māyā*, the sage Antarīkṣa replies that waking is the delusion caused by sense objects superimposed upon the formless Self; dreaming is the delusion of the internal mind; and deep sleep (*suṣupti*) is the latent condition of their impressions. These are all illusions born of the Lord's power. Just as the five elements emerge from Brahman and dissolve back into Him, so too do beings appear to be born and perish—this entire cycle is a display of illusion.

Despite how concrete and convincing the waking world may seem, when viewed dispassionately, there is little distinction between its experiences and those of a dream. After all, both states are equally sublated in deep sleep. The difference lies only in our ignorance of the mystery of that state.

Deep Sleep: The Hidden Revelation

All our experiences of birth and death, of creation and destruction, are rooted in the waking state. But in deep sleep, no such duality exists. Without grasping the import of deep sleep, we cannot understand the true nature of the Self. Just as Columbus "discovered" America, though it had always existed, the sages discovered the secret hidden in the experience of deep sleep. Yet to the ordinary mind, it remains an undiscovered continent.

While the joy of deep sleep is experienced by all, its profound significance is appreciated only by those who seek ultimate truth. Sleep is a divine gift—a supreme grace granted to all—but its value often goes unrecognized. Some, deluded by worldly ambitions, see sleep as an impediment to productivity, lamenting the hours "lost" to it. But how meager is the reward of labor compared to the bliss of deep sleep? Indeed, only the rare yogī approximates that state through *samādhi*.

Time and the Interrelation of States

Yet the impression persists in all minds that waking, dream, and deep sleep occur successively in time. Is it valid to dismiss this shared human experience merely by labeling it as *māyā*? Can a common feeling be considered an error?

Yes, shared it may be, but one must inquire whether it is valid or merely habitual. Truth is not established by the number of people who believe in something. Nor can it be settled by the authority of tradition. What is essential is to test it on the anvil of personal experience.

When we say, “I was dreaming then, and I am awake now,” what is the true referent of “then”? Within the dream itself, we also spoke of “then, now, and later.” But what connection exists between dream-time and waking-time? Each state contains its own internal time. Can one claim that a dream occurred within thirty minutes of waking time? If so, were you awake and dreaming simultaneously? This is clearly untenable. In deep sleep, even the sense of time disappears. Therefore, to assume that all three states coexist in a linear sequence, as though on a single timeline, is the hallmark of *māyā*.

The Waking State and the Illusion of the “Many”

Moreover, it is improper to rely on the views of “the many” to validate the waking world. These “many” are themselves projections within the waking state. When dreaming or in deep sleep, to presume that others remain awake and the waking world continues independently is clearly erroneous. The others we encounter belong to the same waking plane as we do. If we meet them again in a dream, it would be absurd to think they’ve continued in their dream while we returned to waking. The logic fails even to satisfy our intuitive reason.

The Seeming Reality of the Three States

The truth is that we *seem* to experience the three states of waking (*jāgrat*), dreaming (*svapna*), and deep sleep (*suṣupti*). But this perspective arises only from the standpoint of

the waking state. The "I" to whom these three states appear is not itself the experiencer of waking, dream, or sleep. In the witness-nature (*sākṣirūpa*), there is no waking, no dream, and no sleep. When the body, the senses, and the objects of the waking state arise, nothing is added to my true Self; when the dream-state appears, nothing is lost; when deep sleep comes, no world is truly withdrawn; and when waking or dreaming returns, no world is truly created. All of it is but appearance.

This has been explicitly expressed by Ācārya in the commentary to the *sūtra* "*na sthānato'pi parastvabhyupagamāt*" (Brahma Sūtra 3.2.11). Since the *jīva*, on the cessation of all *upādhis* (limiting adjuncts) in *suṣupti*, becomes one with Brahman, we should never make the mistake of assuming that Brahman itself takes on a *niṣprapañcatva* (non-dual, non-phenomenal) nature in deep sleep and a *saprapañcatva* (phenomenal) nature in waking and dream. The essence of Brahman is changeless.

Just as a crystal may appear to be red due to the proximity of a hibiscus flower, yet is not itself tainted with redness, so too the *Ātman* appears to undergo the modifications of the three states while ever remaining pure, unchanging, and untainted. The red appearance is an illusion; no one supposes the crystal has actually been altered. Similarly, the body, mind, and the objects of experience that arise in waking and dream are mere products of ignorance (*avidyākalpita*) and have no ultimate reality (*paramārthasattā*).

Moreover, the *upādhis* associated with the waking state do not carry over into the dream state, and those of the dream state do not persist into waking. These states are mutually exclusive. All of them exist only from the standpoint of the witnessing consciousness. And in *suṣupti*, when even these adjuncts are absent, what remains is the pure witness alone, in its undifferentiated, non-dual nature. Therefore, from the standpoint of ultimate reality, all three states are *absolutely non-existent*.

The entire methodology of the *avasthātraya-prakriyā*—the analysis of the three states—is framed for the sake of instruction, based on the practical presumption (*vyavahārasiddhi*) that there are indeed three distinct states. But at the culmination of the inquiry, what is firmly established is this:

As revealed in the Upaniṣads, the Self (*Ātman*) is ever free of all states, eternally unmanifest (*niṣprapañca*), devoid of all distinctions (*nirviśeṣa*), and untouched by any transformation. It alone is the unchanging *paramārtha tattva*, the highest reality.

41. Intended meaning in the Upanishadic statement

(8-9-53)

Resolving the Apparent Dualism in Scriptural Statements

Brahman alone is the supreme truth (*paramārtha-tattva*); that Brahman is none other than the *Ātman*—the innermost Self of all beings. The world does not enjoy independent existence; whenever it appears, it does so only as subordinate to the *Ātman*. Therefore, *Ātman* is the non-dual (*advitīya*) reality—this conclusion is reached through a careful and consistent examination of both the *Śruti-prasthāna* and the *Sūtra-prasthāna*.

In both the *Upaniṣads* and the *Brahmasūtras*, the subject of investigation is Brahman. This inquiry (*jijñāsā*) is meant to lead to right understanding. Brahman is described as the cause of the world. The knowledge of Brahman arises through scripture (*śāstra-pramāṇa*), and Vedānta deals with Brahman as the highest reality (*brahma-vastu-para*). This is the foundational framework.

The Puzzle of Dualism in Inquiry

A doubt may now arise: the very act of inquiry implies a triad—(1) the inquirer (*jijñāsu*), (2) the process of inquiry (*jijñāsā*), and (3) the object of inquiry (*jijñāsya*). Similarly, the declaration that Brahman is the cause (*kāraṇa*) and the world is the effect (*kārya*) again implies duality. Likewise, when *śāstra* is described as a *pramāṇa* (valid means of knowledge), Brahman becomes the *prameya* (object known), and the seeker is the *pramātṛ* (knower). It appears that *śāstra*, *pramāṇa*, *prameya*, and *pramātṛ* all function within a dualistic framework.

Thus, if every function of language and cognition presupposes duality—between word and object (*pada* and *padārtha*), between sentence and its meaning (*vākya* and *vākyārtha*)—does it not follow that even scriptural assertions of non-duality (*advaita*) are self-defeating? Wouldn't this be akin to saying, "My mother is barren"?

The Problem is Linguistic, Not Ontological

To resolve this doubt, one must understand the nature of speech and knowledge themselves.

A story will help illustrate. Once in Bangalore, at the house of a distinguished advocate, a discussion was hosted by Sri Sacchidananda Saraswati Swamiji, a monk who had arrived from Calcutta. He posed a question to a group of Madhva scholars:

> "In *śruti*-statements such as *sadeva somya idamagramāsīt* and *ātmā vā idam eka evāgra āsīt*, Brahman alone is declared to exist before creation. Is it not clear that no *pradhāna*, atom (*paramāṇu*), or other entity can be posited outside the Self? Is this not decisive proof of non-duality?"

Some scholars responded:

> "When we say 'He was the only rich man in town,' it doesn't mean no one else existed. Similarly, saying that the Supreme Self alone existed does not prove that nothing else did. The word *agre* (before) implies time, and the words *sat* and *eka* point to contrast with something else. Therefore, even these sentences imply duality."

Swamiji countered:

> "Then what kind of sentence would convince you of non-duality?"

The scholars retorted:

> "We don't need to present any such sentence! You claim *advaita* is proven by *śruti*. But all *śruti* speaks of duality. Show us a sentence that *clearly* denies duality!"

With that, the session turned into a heated commotion and ended without resolution.

On Grammatical Duality and Intentional Meaning

This incident highlights the key confusion: the structure of language *appears* to imply duality. Words differentiate, sentences distinguish, and knowledge seems to rest on the distinction between knower and known. But what is grammatically implied is not always what is intended. One must distinguish between the literal and the purposive.

For example: “This man in the red turban is Hanumanthayya.” Here, the red turban is only an identifier; here, it is not being asserted that Hanumanthayya always wears it. Similarly, in the sentence, “Before creation, this was the Self, one without a second,” time, creation, and ‘before’ are incidental; the intended purport (*tātparya*) lies in the phrase “one without a second.”

Establishing Intended Meaning Through Tātparya-liṅgas

To ascertain this intention, Vedānta employs the six indicators of sentence purport (*ṣaṭ-tātparya-liṅgas*):

- *Upakrama* (beginning),
- *Upasaṃhāra* (conclusion),
- *Abhyāsa* (repetition),
- *Apūrvatā* (uniqueness),
- *Arthavāda* (eulogy or explanatory remarks), and
- *Phala* (result).

In the relevant *śruti*-passage, all these point to one central idea: the Self alone exists; the Self alone manifests as everything; the Self alone is the truth; and all else is unreal. Duality, though appearing in the sentence, is not the purport of the sentence.

A Final Illustration

A humorous illustration will help. Once, school inspectors visiting a school named *Sadvidyā Pāṭhaśālā* (School of True Knowledge) asked: “Is there an *Asadvidyā Pāṭhaśālā* (School of False Knowledge) somewhere?” A friend, seeing that the officials had signed as “Dakṣiṇāmūrti Śāstrī,” quipped, “Where, then, are the Uttaramūrti Śāstrīs?” His reply humorously mirrored their misunderstanding.

The point is this: the incidental implications of words (*padārtha*) are not always what the sentence (*vākya*) intends. Discerning the *intended meaning* (*tātparya*) is the task of philosophical inquiry.

The Role of Śāstra and the Nature of Brahman

Even though Brahman is not an object of any *pramāṇa* (valid means of knowledge), its knowability through *śāstra* must be understood in a unique way. This does not mean that Brahman becomes an object of knowledge like any other. Prior to inquiry, when one takes Brahman as something to be known—just as one might initially presume Brahman to be some separate entity or object—*śāstra* is accepted as a pramāṇa.

But since Brahman is the very Self (*ātman*) of all, there is no need for *śāstra* to *reveal* Brahman as something *new*. Rather, because Brahman is never an object of direct perception, inference, or any other pramāṇa, *śāstra* functions as a unique means to remove ignorance and reveal the Self's ever-existing reality. It does not teach Brahman as "something other" but rather reveals that there is no distinction between the knower (*pramātṛ*), the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and the known (*prameya*).

The *śruti* declares: "*Anyadeva tadviditādatho aviditādadhi*"—"It is different from the known and also beyond the unknown." Brahman is neither knowable nor unknowable in the usual sense, but is the very essence of the knower. From this realization, even the status of being a knower (*jñātṛtva*) is negated, and all *pramāṇa*-based activity ceases. Thus, *śāstra* is rightly called the *final pramāṇa*—that which terminates the very function of pramāṇa itself.

Beyond Word and Thought

Does this mean that there is no sentence or knowledge that reveals Brahman? Yes, from one standpoint. Since Brahman has no *nāma* (name) or *rūpa* (form), it cannot be expressed through words denoting *jāti* (genus), *dravya* (substance), *guṇa* (quality), *karma* (action), or *saṃbandha* (relationship). All that is known by the senses or conceived by the mind depends upon the consciousness that is Brahman. That which is non-objectifiable cannot be captured by any mode of knowledge.

Still, this does not mean that Vedāntins deny the reality of Brahman. Rather, the *abhidhāna-abhidheya-bheda* (distinction between name and named) that appears is a false projection upon the consciousness that is *Brahmātman*. In *suṣupti* and *samādhi*, this *ātman* abides by itself, independent of duality—something we all experience. The same consciousness shines in waking and dream as well; hence, the apparent multiplicity of names and forms is founded on the Self-luminous *Brahman-tattva*.

The Māṇḍūkya Perspective and Oṃkāra

This has been concisely stated in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* in the context of the analysis of *oṃkāra*. The syllable *oṃ* consists of three *mātras* (components)—*a*, *u*, and *m*. If the waking-state Self, the dream-state Self, and the deep-sleep Self are indicated by these, then all experiential realities are enveloped in the *ātmatattva* that *oṃkāra* signifies.

But the true *ātman* transcends all three states—it is ever luminous, unchanging, and non-objectifiable. Thus, from the standpoint of *paramārtha*, it is neither *abhidhāna* (name) nor *abhidheya* (named). Terms like *oṃkāra* and *Brahman* refer not to a distinct entity but serve as *lakṣaṇā* (indicative) means to reveal that which is beyond name and form.

The Experiential Nature of Self-Knowledge

To indicate that Brahman is known only through immediate realization (*anubhava*), one sage exclaimed, “One must be as though dead to know the *tattva*.” When *Bāṣkali* asked

Bādhva about the nature of the *ātman*, the latter remained silent. Finally, he said: "I am teaching you!" And, as Śaṅkara writes in *Sūtra Bhāṣya* (3.2.12), the *ātman* is of the nature of stillness (*upaśānta*). The *śruti* proceeds by presenting many teaching devices and finally negates them all with the famous phrase: "*neti neti*"—"Not this, not this."

This is echoed in the story of Bhagavān Ramana Maharshi, who told a seeker to "Go as you came!"—a profound expression of *adhyāropa-apavāda*, the method of superimposition and negation.

Why Vedānta Seems Difficult

The *śruti* says: "See the Brahman that is beyond all measure in your own Self." Many wonder: is it really that easy? Yes—and yet, for those who are attached to externalities, nothing is harder. Most people live in love with illusion. They do not want the truth—they are content with appearances.

In the fabled *Valley of the Blind*, no one knew what color meant. When someone described a color, the people thought there must be a disease in that part of the body! Similarly, those without inner purity (*antaḥkaraṇa-śuddhi*) are unable to grasp the *tattva* of Vedānta. It is said that once, a pious man used to recite a verse daily that included the refrain: "*taṃ saṃsārāna vināśaṃ harimāḍe*." When his mother heard it, she said, “Son, we householders should not chant verses that destroy the world!” The misunderstanding, sadly, was complete.

The Need for Preparedness

What is the reason for such ignorance? It is the lack of proper *adhikāra* (preparedness). What is the *tātparya* (purport) of Vedānta? What is the nature of the *tattva* it reveals? Are we truly interested in contemplating and understanding these matters?

Right at the beginning of the *Brahmasūtra*, the word *atha* in the aphorism *athāto brahmajijñāsā* is immensely significant. It points to the eligibility (*adhikāra*) for inquiry. What are the means of attaining Self-knowledge (*tattva-jñāna*)? Śaṅkara explains it clearly: those who perform scripturally enjoined actions selflessly, who possess *viveka* (discrimination), *vairāgya* (dispassion), the sixfold wealth beginning with *śama* (tranquility), and an intense longing for liberation (*mumukṣutva*)—they alone are qualified for the pursuit of Brahman.

The Modern Vedantic Crisis

As a musician first tunes his instruments before performing, so too must the seeker first refine himself through *sādhana*. Is it not necessary for someone planting coconut trees to dig a well, water the saplings, and wait patiently for the fruit? If one plants a tree in one place and waters another, what can result except fruitless effort?

Many modern Vedāntins find themselves in this situation. They shun conduct, reject worship, avoid association with noble teachers, and lack *mumukṣutva*. How can Self-realization arise in such conditions? It is not that there are no competent teachers—it is that true disciples are missing. Everyone wants to be a guru! Even those who have barely read one Vedāntic work begin to teach others.

Those who seek to attain the true fruit of Vedantic contemplation must first be firmly established in the qualities befitting a disciple. What are the essential disciplines and inner qualifications that a seeker of liberation (*mumukṣu*) must cultivate? This is the foremost question to be understood—prior to any philosophical speculation.

Turning to the Gītāprasthāna

To address this, we now turn to the *Gītāprasthāna*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which is preeminently concerned with the *sādhana*—the means. One should not mistakenly assume that the *Gītā* is silent on the matter of doctrine. The truth is, the *Gītā* does indeed expound doctrine (*siddhānta*), and that too in perfect consonance with both the *Upaniṣads* and the *Sūtraprasthāna*. However, its primary contribution lies in its emphasis on the preparatory disciplines—those inner and outer qualifications by which the seeker becomes fit for realization.

For this reason, it is imperative that we study the *Gītā* with a calm and focused mind, not as a mere philosophical text, but as a guide to personal transformation. Only then does its instruction yield the supreme fruit of Self-knowledge.

42. Introduction to the Gītāprasthāna

Having thus examined the *Upaniṣatprasthāna* and *Sūtraprasthāna* in accordance with Ācārya Śaṅkara's vision, we now turn our attention to the *Gītāprasthāna*. Before entering this inquiry, it is important to recognize that Śaṅkarācārya was not the first to comment on the *Bhagavadgītā*. Numerous earlier commentators had already interpreted the *Gītā* in divergent ways. Ācārya himself acknowledges this in his introduction:

> "This *Gītāśāstra*, a distillation of the essence of the *Vedas*, is difficult to understand. Though many have explained the words, meanings, sentences, sentence-meanings, and logical arguments, their interpretations often contradict one another, leading to diverse conclusions. I will now compose a brief commentary to determine its meaning through discriminative reasoning."

This need to *discriminate the meaning* (artha-viveka) arises precisely because of the prevalence of conflicting interpretations—some of which Śaṅkara explicitly refutes in his own *Bhāṣya*.

The Proliferation of Commentaries and the Need for Discrimination

Since Śaṅkara's time, the *Gītāprasthāna* has generated a vast forest of commentaries, sub-commentaries, and expositions. As one *sādhu* once remarked with irony and depth, "Even if one were to cultivate a garden of *kalpataru* trees, it could still be managed. But the meaning of the *Gītā* cannot be fully comprehended." Such is the scale of the interpretive tradition.

The reason for highlighting this is not merely to point out an academic difficulty. Even today, interpretations of the *Gītā* continue to diverge—many of them, regrettably,

misaligned with the central intent of the text. Therefore, it is necessary for a seeker (*mumukṣu*) to approach the *Gītā* with discernment and reverence.

The *Gītā* contains expositions on *karma* (action), *bhakti* (devotion), *jñāna* (knowledge), *yoga*, and the harmony of all these paths (*sarva-yoga-sāmarasya*). Yet commentators continue to offer conflicting emphases, with some elevating *karma*, others *bhakti*, and others *jñāna*, often in isolation. In this complex interpretive landscape, how is the true purport of the *Gītā* to be known?

Towards a Unified Vision of the Prasthānatraya

Even with the wide acceptance of Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya*, doubts persist in this jungle of views. Hence the question arises: how should we approach the *Gītāprasthāna*? The answer, Śaṅkara suggests, lies in seeing the *Gītā* as a coherent expression of the same non-dual truth (*advaita-tattva*) found in the *Upaniṣads* and systematized in the *Sūtras*.

Some modern interpreters treat the *Bhagavadgītā* either as a simplified summary of the *Upaniṣads* or as an independent text offering a distinct path to liberation. But this is contrary to the vision of Ācārya, who maintains that the *Gītā* is one with the *prasthānatraya* in spirit and substance.

A reflective seeker must therefore prioritize the words of such an Ācārya, who recognizes in the *Gītā* a continuity of Vedāntic experience and doctrine. My more extensive analysis of the *Gītā* is found in the book *Lectures on the Bhagavadgītā*, published by the *Adhyātmaprakāśa Kāryālaya* of Hōlenarasīpura. Hence, a full re-examination is not needed here. Still, as part of understanding the unified intent of the *prasthānatraya*, a brief consideration of the *Gītā* is indispensable.

Śaṅkara's Invocation and Cosmological Framework

Śaṅkara opens his introduction to the *Bhagavadgītā* with this *śloka*:

> *Nārāyaṇaḥ parō'vyaktād aṇḍamavyaktasambhavam |*
> *aṇḍasya antaḥ mē lokāḥ saptadvīpā ca mēdinī ||*

While the exact *Purāṇic* source is uncertain, this verse—cited in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakavārtika* as a saying of Vyāsa—expresses the idea that Lord Nārāyaṇa transcends both the manifest and the unmanifest. Yet from this unmanifest emerges the cosmic egg (*aṇḍa*), within which dwell the fourteen worlds, including our earth of seven continents. Thus, all beings exist within and are sustained by Him.

To maintain the world, Lord Nārāyaṇa imparted two paths of *dharma*: *pravṛtti* (engaged action) and *nivṛtti* (renunciation). These were entrusted to various *Prajāpatis* and transmitted to humanity through the *guru-śiṣya paramparā*. *Pravṛtti-dharma* leads to worldly prosperity; *nivṛtti-dharma* leads to liberation. When desire (*kāma*) grew unchecked and *adharma* began to eclipse true *dharma*, the Lord incarnated as the son of Vasudeva and Devakī to restore and preserve it.

The Nature of the Divine Teacher and the Teaching

In this human form, though unborn, ever-pure, ever-liberated, and all-knowing, He manifests through His own *māyā*—a divine play (*līlā*) that is, in itself, an act of supreme

compassion. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahaṁsa once offered a striking image of this play: "What was Nārāyaṇa doing in Vaikuṇṭha? Threading an elephant through the eye of a needle!" But even more wondrous is this: the *birthless Paramātman* appearing to take human birth for the sake of the world's upliftment.

To the noble Arjuna, the Lord imparted once again the twin paths of *dharma* so that the world might follow his example. This teaching, later composed into seven hundred verses by Vyāsa in the *Mahābhārata*, is the *Bhagavadgītā*—a scripture meant to awaken discernment and deliver clarity.

Reconciling Pravṛtti and Nivṛtti

According to Ācārya, the *Bhagavadgītā* serves the function of reconciling the two streams found in the *Veda—pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*—by illuminating their relationship and showing how one leads into the other. Having studied the *Upaniṣads* and the *Sūtras*, we now see how the *Gītā* explains the same vision through the practical lens of action, devotion, and wisdom.

I have already pointed out that many have written commentaries on the Gītā. What we must now evaluate is the degree to which the Ācārya's interpretation conforms with universal experience (*sārvatrika-anubhava*). This assessment too must ultimately be grounded in our own experience.

Although ritual action (*pravṛtti-dharma*) may lead to results such as attainment of divine realms (*deva-ādi-sthāna-prāpti)*, when such actions are performed without desire for the fruit (phalāsaṅga), and with an attitude of offering to Īśvara (*Īśvara-ārpaṇa-buddhi*), they purify the mind (*citta-śuddhi)* and lead to fitness (*adhikāritva*) for jñāna.

Once *jñāna-niṣṭhā*—steadfastness in Self-knowledge— is attained, then *mokṣa* is also attained. This is the arc of Ācārya Śaṅkara's interpretation.

The reflective reader must ask: Does this interpretation resonate with the *Gītā's* verses? Does it align with the teaching of the *śruti*? Does it ring true to lived experience? These questions cannot be answered merely through bookish learning but require *sādhana*, inner clarity, and direct insight into the nature of the Self. Those who seek proper answers to these questions must themselves take up the *sādhanā* (means), and thereby directly perceive the refinement of the mind (*antaḥkaraṇa-saṁskāra*), the arising of knowledge (jñānotpatti), and the resulting steadfastness in the knowledge of the reality (*tattva-jñāna)*—which is validated by universal experience. This much is clear. Not all can master the highest reaches of physical science, yet even ordinary students may grasp its outlines and benefit. So too with the *Gītā*. While it ultimately reveals the same *brahmavidyā* as the *Upaniṣads*, it also serves as a practical and progressive means of approach—accessible to all according to their level of readiness.

The Significance of "Śrī Bhagavānuvāca" and the Context of the Gītā

The recurring phrase *"Śrī Bhagavānuvāca"*—"Thus spoke the Blessed Lord"—throughout the *Bhagavad Gītā* is not a mere formal device. It serves as a constant reminder that these are not the words of a poet or sage, but the direct utterances of the Supreme Being—*Bhagavān*—spoken for the upliftment of all.

The *Gītā* is situated within the grand epic *Mahābhārata*, whose very name *Jaya*—meaning "victory"—denotes not merely a worldly triumph but the eternal victory of *dharma*. As stated by Vyāsa at both the opening and conclusion of the epic, the *Mahābhārata* exists to teach *dharma* in all its dimensions—not merely to narrate a war between rival clans. Therefore, the right approach is to first bow in reverence to *Nārāyaṇa* and *Nara*, the divine seer and the ideal human, and then study the *Bhārata* in that light.

The repeated invocation of *"Śrī Bhagavānuvāca"* deepens this attitude of reverence. It reminds us that it is *Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa* Himself who reveals the essence of the twin *dharmas—pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*—in a moment of cosmic instruction. If one listens with this awareness, the very recitation of the *Gītā* becomes an act of filling one's own being with the presence of God.

The Lord delivered this teaching to Arjuna precisely when the latter was overcome by sorrow (*śoka*) and delusion (*moha*). It is in that moment of existential crisis that the Lord speaks—not only to Arjuna, but to all of us who are likewise bound by grief and confusion. To remember this while studying or chanting the *Gītā* is to recognize that these words are meant for our instruction, our guidance, and our awakening.

Let us therefore approach the *Gītā* with this perspective of sacred intimacy: as a divine conversation echoing across time, meant to lift the veil of delusion for all earnest seekers.

43. The Subject Matter of the Bhagavad Gita

(10:9-53)

The Gītā as the Scripture of Liberation and the Essence of the Vedas

"*Imaṃ dviprakāraṃ dharmaṃ niḥśreyasaprayojanaṃ paramārtha-tattvaṃ ca vāsudevākhyaṃ paraṃ brahmābhidheya-bhūtaṃ viśeṣato'bhivyayad viśiṣṭa-prayojana-sambandhābhidheya-vad gītāśāstram*"

In this verse, the Ācārya succinctly expresses the purport of the *Gītāśāstra*, affirming that it is a scripture which expounds both the twofold *dharma—pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*—that culminate in liberation (*niḥśreyasa*), and the ultimate reality (*paramārtha-tattva*), identified as *Vāsudeva*, the Supreme *Brahman*. The *Gītā* thus has a distinctive structure: it presents a unified content (*abhidheya*) and purpose (*prayojana*) while being grounded in the context of a dialogue.

This statement captures the essential continuity between the *Vedānta-prasthāna* and the *Gītā-prasthāna*. In the *Vedānta-prasthāna*, the central aim is the realization of *Parabrahman*. The *Gītā*, while reaffirming this goal, gives detailed and pragmatic instruction regarding the preparatory *dharma-s*, clearly expounding the means (*sādhana*) through *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* for attaining that end.

Nevertheless, we must be cautious. Many today attempt to interpret the *Gītā* independently of the Vedic tradition, extracting meanings that diverge from the Upaniṣadic spirit. Often, such interpretations are justified on the basis of personal experience or by isolating specific verses—such as "*jhaṣāṇāṁ makaraś cāsmi*"—to support unrelated

views, including discourses on gender or contemporary issues. But this selective and fragmented approach divorces the *Gītā* from its original framework and leads to arbitrary readings. Scripture must be read with fidelity to its context and intent.

It is a commonly cited tradition that "*Because śūdras, women, and the relatives of dvijas were ineligible to study the Vedas, Vyāsa composed the Mahābhārata*." This points to the compassionate intent behind the composition of the *Bhārata*, which is itself regarded as the *fifth Veda*. When even *dvijas* found it difficult to study all four *Vedas*, Vyāsa divided them among his disciples. Yet for those who were unable to study even these, he composed the *Bhārata*, embedding within it the essence of Vedic wisdom.

In those times, even women and *śūdras* had knowledge of Sanskrit. Thus Vyāsa declared: "*śrāvayec chaturō varṇān kṛtvā brāhmaṇam agrataḥ*"—"Let one make the four *varṇas* listen to the *Bhārata*, having placed a *Brāhmaṇa* in front." Today, however, due to the pervasive influence of Kali Yuga, even among *Brāhmaṇas*, knowledge of Sanskrit has diminished. The *Sūta Saṁhitā* further affirms that even *mlecchas* should be taught *dharma* through translations of *śāstra.* In many respects, our condition today has fallen to the level of *mlecchas*.

Numerous *saṁskāras* (forty in total) and the eight inner virtues (*ātmaguṇas*) laid down by sages like Gautama have become obscure or forgotten; even proper funeral rites are neglected in many households. In such circumstances, how can we hope to grasp the meaning of the *Vedas* directly? Yet, there remains an accessible path—the *Bhārata*, and especially the *Gītā* contained within it. By listening to or studying the *Gītā*, we become eligible to perform the *dharma* taught in the *Vedas*, even if we lack the eligibility to engage with Vedic recitation directly.

Ineligibility for Vedic study does not imply ineligibility for *dharma*. A humorous anecdote may clarify this: once, a man was teaching his wife the Vedic injunction "*satyam vada*" (speak the truth), and she responded, "That applies to you *dvija-s* who have authority over the Vedas—are you saying we need not speak the truth since we lack that authority?" The implication is clear: the core values of the *Vedas*, like truthfulness, are not the exclusive preserve of a class, but universal.

Hence, adherence to the *meaning* of the *Vedas*—not mere ritual eligibility—makes one truly *Vaidika*. And it is through the *Bhārata*, and most especially the *Gītā*, that even those who cannot access the *Vedas* directly may come to know and live according to the eternal *dharma*.

The Bhagavad Gītā as the Essence and Accessible Revelation of Vedānta

The *Bhagavad Gītā* elegantly encapsulates the core teachings of all the *Upaniṣads* in a single celebrated verse:

sarvopaniṣado gāvo dogdhā gopālanandanaḥ |
pārtho vatsaḥ sudhīr bhoktā dugdhaṁ gītāmṛtaṁ mahat ||

"All the *Upaniṣads* are like cows; Kṛṣṇa is the cowherd who milks them; Arjuna is the calf; the wise seeker is the enjoyer of the milk; and the *Gītā* is the great nectar-milk."

This well-known analogy reinforces the Ācārya-s' view that the true purport of the *Bhagavad Gītā* must be understood in harmony with the *Upaniṣads*. Even those who may

be unable to directly contemplate the *Upaniṣadic* statements can access the knowledge of *Vedānta* through the *Gītā*, which serves as a gateway for aspirants.

The *Gītā* comprises eighteen chapters, each traditionally ending with a *colophon* in the form:

śrīmadbhagavadgītāsu upaniṣatsu brahmavidyāyāṁ yogaśāstre śrīkṛṣṇārjunasaṁvāde arjunaviṣādayogo nāma prathamo'dhyāyaḥ

These statements—now standard in printed editions—suggest that each chapter is associated with a distinct *yoga*. However, variations in chapter names across different traditions indicate that these colophons were likely appended later. None of the principal commentators, including Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, or Madhva, has written on these chapter endings, and their absence from early manuscripts casts doubt on their originality. Thus, they provide limited guidance in discerning the true *tātparya* (intent) of the *Gītā*.

Likewise, attempting to determine the *Gītā*'s purport through the meditation verses (*dhyānaślokas*) appended in some recensions is equally problematic. In one anecdote, a scholar, asked to explain the *Gītā*, began by quoting the *dhyānaśloka*:

pārthāya pratibodhitāṁ bhagavatā nārāyaṇena svayaṁ…

He was promptly interrupted by those who questioned the scriptural basis and the absence of an explicit *advaita* doctrine in that verse. The scholar then had to abandon his approach and begin directly with the *Gītā* itself. These meditation verses were composed by later devotees and are not uniformly recited or accepted by all traditions. Hence, they too cannot serve as definitive sources for understanding the Gītā's core doctrine.

Some modern interpreters attempt to elevate the *Gītā* above the *Veda*, arguing that while access to the *Veda* is restricted to the *dvijas* (twice-born), the *Gītā* is inclusive of *striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrāḥ* (women, merchants, and laborers). From this perspective, the *Gītā* is viewed as a kind of redemption for the *Veda*'s exclusivity. Others suggest that the *Veda*'s intent is better actualized through the *Gītā*. However, such claims remain unaccepted in the traditional *Vedic* framework, which does not admit that the *Gītā* contradicts the *Veda*. Rather, the distinction lies in the Gītā's accessibility—not in any opposition to *śruti*. The essential truth is that eligibility has declined over time, and the *Gītā* represents the compassionate effort of the *ṛṣis* to present the same *Vedāntic* message in a form intelligible to less qualified aspirants.

The *Mahābhārata* itself acknowledges this shift. In the *Bhṛgu–Bhāradvāja* dialogue, it is said that though all were originally qualified for *brāhmaṇahood*, over time, distinctions in *varṇa* emerged based on karma. As desires intensified and minds became increasingly extroverted, individuals could no longer grasp the deeper meanings of the *Veda*, which are accessible only to the *uttamādhikārins* (highest-qualified aspirants). To accommodate the *mandādhikāris* (those of slow or limited capability), the sages revealed the same teachings through more accessible mediums like the *Bhārata*.

A *Purāṇic* verse illustrates the progressive simplification of *sādhana*:

"In the Kṛta Yuga, realization is attained through meditation (dhyāna); in the Tretā Yuga through ritual (yajña); in the Dvāpara Yuga through worship (arcana); but in Kali Yuga, through the singing of Kṛṣṇa's name (nāmasaṅkīrtana)."

Convincing people in Kali Yuga to even engage in *nāmasaṅkīrtana* is as difficult as persuading those of earlier ages to undertake austere disciplines! In fact, even in this act, disputes and divisions have crept in.

Nevertheless, it is the presence of great souls—those who, by their own purity and steadfastness, transform Kali Yuga into a new *Satya Yuga*—that sustains the continuity of *śāstra*. Without such *mahāpuruṣas*, the *Vedaśāstra* would fade into irrelevance. It is solely due to the Lord's grace and the guidance of His devotees that *sādhanas* suitable even for the lowest rung of aspirants remain available.

The Gītā as an Accessible Revelation of Upaniṣadic Truth

Setting aside incidental elaborations, let us now return to the central point: the *Ācārya* unequivocally maintains that the essential meaning of the *Upaniṣads* is also conveyed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. To illustrate this, one may take just two mantras from the *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad*—"*īśāvāsyamidaṁ sarvaṁ*" and "*kurvanneveha karmāṇi*"—and observe that the entire thread of the *Gītā* is woven from this very essence. Such is the profound congruence between these texts.

In the first mantra of the *Upaniṣad*, the ultimate truth is declared: that everything is pervaded by the *Īśvara*, the Supreme Lord. It advises the seeker to protect himself through renunciation (*tyāga*). Correspondingly, in the *Gītā*, the declaration "*vāsudevaḥ sarvam iti*" affirms the all-pervasiveness of the Lord, while "*sarvadharmān parityajya*" prescribes renunciation as the highest path. Similarly, *karmayoga* is presented in the *Gītā* not as an end in itself, but as a preparatory step—an effective means leading to *jñānayoga*.

In the *Upaniṣads*, this layered progression from action to knowledge is subtle and not easily discernible without the aid of commentaries. But the *Gītā* articulates the same *Vedic* meaning with exceptional clarity and accessibility. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the *Gītā* positions renunciation (*saṁnyāsa*) as the very culmination of all spiritual *sādhanas*.

Accordingly, the *Ācārya* explains that the two-fold *dharma* enjoined in the *Vedas*—namely, *pravṛtti-lakṣaṇa dharma* (that which pertains to engagement in action) and *nivṛtti-lakṣaṇa dharma* (that which pertains to renunciation)—are both elaborated in the *Gītā*. Specifically, he interprets *nivṛtti dharma* as the abandonment of the triad of desires (*kāma-traya-tyāga*) and resolute devotion to the *Ātman*.

For all these reasons, it must be clearly understood that, according to the *Ācārya*, the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is nothing other than the realization of the Supreme *Brahman*—referred to as Nārāyaṇa or Vāsudeva—and of the *pravṛtti-nivṛtti dharmas* that are already present in the *Vedas*. In the forthcoming discussions, we shall further explore how the *Ācārya* substantiates this position in detail.

44. The goal of the Gita is the cessation of sorrow and delusion

(11-9-53)

The Gītā's Continuity with Vedānta

Since the two forms of *dharma—pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*—stated in the Vedas are also expounded in the Bhagavad Gītā, the Gītā is not to be treated as an independent *śāstra*, but rather as one that is perfectly aligned with the Upaniṣads. As previously noted, its setting and structure are framed within the larger intent of *śokamohādi saṁsāra-bīja*—the removal of sorrow and delusion that are the root-seeds of worldly bondage.

Arjuna's Despondency: The Psychological Context

To grasp the context of the Gītā, consider the verse: *na yotsye iti govindam uktvā tūṣṇīṁ babhūva ha*—"Saying 'I shall not fight,' he became silent." Śaṅkarācārya encapsulates the spirit of the Gītā thus:

"ity etad ānnaḥ prāṇināṁ
śoka-moha-ādi-saṁsāra-bīja-doṣodbhava-kāraṇa-pradarśanārthena vyākhyeyaḥ granthaḥ"

—"This text is to be interpreted as revealing the cause of the arising of the defects, such as sorrow and delusion, which serve as seeds for *saṁsāra* in all beings."

The premise is clear: sorrow (*śoka*) and delusion (*moha*) are the root causes of bondage, even for the most accomplished.

Arjuna as Paradigmatic Seeker

Arjuna, the heroic son of Indra, famed for his skill with the *Gāṇḍīva*, had pleased Lord Śiva, secured the *Pāśupatāstra*, conquered the *Nivātakavacas*, and was guided by Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa himself. Yet, standing between the two armies, overcome by attachment to his kin, his *viveka* (discrimination) and *vijñāna* (discernment) collapsed. Though his duty (*svadharma*) was that of a warrior, he abandoned it under delusion, contemplating even the *paradharma* of renunciation.

Śaṅkara states further:

"tathā ca sarvaprāṇināṁ śoka-mohādi-doṣāviṣṭa-cetasāṁ svabhāvata eva svadharma-parityāgaḥ pratiṣiddha-sevā ca syāt | svadharma-pravṛttānām api teṣāṁ vānāśramādi-pravṛttiḥ phalābhisandhipūrvikā eva sāhaṅkārā ca bhavati"

—"Thus, for all beings whose minds are overpowered by sorrow and delusion, the natural result is abandonment of one's own duty and engagement in prohibited actions. Even for those performing their *svadharma*, actions are generally driven by ego and a desire for results."

Self-Knowledge as the Sole Remedy

In this view, only *ātmajñāna*—the realization of the Self—can uproot the afflictions of *śoka* and *moha*. And this knowledge, Śaṅkara clarifies, was imparted by the Lord through Arjuna, for the welfare of the world.

This harmonizes with the Upaniṣadic dictum:

"yatra sarvam ātmābhūt tat kena kaṁ paśyet, yena kaṁ jighret"

“When all has become the Self, by what and whom should one see? By what and whom should one smell?”

When all multiplicity is negated through knowledge, neither sorrow nor delusion can remain.

The Gītā's Aim: The Eradication of Delusion

The Gītā thus aims to dissolve *moha* and *śoka* through *ātmajñāna*. This principle is not just theoretical but practical. Consider the man in Kurthukoti who, while lecturing on the virtues of renouncing anger from the *Eknāthi Bhāgavata*, became angry upon hearing that a ram had torn the scripture in the temple. His grief and identification with the incident betrayed a deeper ignorance. Similarly, Arjuna’s confusion was not about duty per se, but about the apparent contradiction between righteousness and violence.

Vedānta in Daily Life

Even a Vedantin can lose *viveka* when afflicted. A *śāstrin*, revered in his town, once cried out in pain after being stung by a scorpion. A merchant-disciple gently asked, “Swāmī, does the scorpion sting affect the body or the *ātman*?” This humorous yet poignant reminder rekindled his discernment. He laughed and said, “Yes! The pain is only for the body—not for the *ātman*.”

In that moment of clarity, the *śāstrin* attained true insight—not from intellectual debate, but from impartial *vicāra* (discerning examination). His disciple, by reminding him of the truth of the *ātman*, became his *guru*, illuminating the knowledge that had momentarily slipped.

The Root of Worldly Identity and Delusion

All worldly attributes arise from the *kārya-karaṇa-saṅghāta*—the aggregate of body (*kārya*) and senses (*karaṇa*). It is this composite instrument that becomes the locus for experiencing the results of *dharma* and *adharma*, leading the *jīva* to wrongly identify and claim, "This body is me," or "This is mine," or "Those associated with it are mine," and "Its enemies are my enemies." Though the *ātman* is merely a witness, and the only connection it bears to this aggregate is due to ignorance (*avidyā*), such notions arise. It is from this misidentification that *śoka* (grief) and *moha* (delusion) are born. The destruction of these through *tattva-jñāna* (knowledge of the real) is the central purpose of Vedānta.

Is This the Meaning of the Gītā?

But is this truly the meaning of the *Gītā*? That question must be seriously considered, especially given the variety of interpretations available. Balagangadhar Tilak, for instance, argued that the Gītā’s real meaning cannot be discerned solely from its opening and concluding chapters. He pointed out that Arjuna begins the Gītā by refusing to fight and ends it by consenting to Kṛṣṇa’s will—*kariṣye vacanaṁ tava*—thus, some infer the Gītā primarily teaches *karma-yoga*.

However, this is a misapplication of the principle of analyzing beginnings and endings. To take an analogy: the nature of a *Purāṇa* cannot be inferred solely from the storyteller’s

arrival or departure. Similarly, Arjuna's initial sorrow or concluding resolve is not the true beginning or end of the Gītā.

The True Beginning: Lord's Teaching of Self-Knowledge

The true beginning of the Gītā lies in the Lord's first teaching:
*"aśocyān anvaśocas tvaṁ prajñāvādāṁś ca bhāṣase" (*Gītā 2.11)
—"You grieve for those who are not to be grieved for, and yet you speak words of wisdom."

Bhagavān, who is beyond birth and death, begins by pointing out Arjuna's sorrow and delusion and immediately introduces *ātma-jñāna*—the indestructibility and immutability of the Self (*ātman*).

The Conclusion: Dispelling Delusion through Knowledge

At the conclusion of the Gītā, in Chapter 18, the Lord inquires:

"kaścid etac chrutaṁ pārtha tvayā aikāgreṇa cetasā?
kaccid ajñāna-saṁmohaḥ praṇaṣṭas te dhanañjaya?" (18.72)

—"Have you heard this with a concentrated mind, O Pārtha? Has your delusion born of ignorance been destroyed?"

To which Arjuna responds:

"naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtir labdhā tvatprasādān mayācyuta" (18.73)

—"My delusion is gone; memory has been restored by your grace, O Acyuta!"

Thus, it becomes clear: the *Gītā*'s ultimate aim is not to prompt external action but to dispel *ajñāna* (ignorance) and *moha* (delusion) through *jñāna* (knowledge).

A Text of Liberation, Not War

Arjuna, gripped by fear of *pāpa* (sin) in killing revered teachers and relatives, abandoned the war. But with the removal of *moha* through self-knowledge imparted by Kṛṣṇa, he was able to return to action. This does not make the *Gītā* an incitement to warfare.

Śaṅkarācārya's interpretation makes it abundantly clear: **the *Gītā* does not advocate action for its own sake, but for the sake of purifying the mind in preparation for knowledge**. Its purpose lies in the removal of sorrow and delusion, and as such, its message is universal and timeless.

45. The Nature of Pravṛtti and Nivṛtti

(12-9-53)

Unity of the Vedānta and Gītā Prasthānas

The *Vedānta prasthāna* and *Gītā prasthāna* share a unified doctrinal foundation. By examining how the teachings of the Gītā reflect principles already present in the Vedas, this unity becomes evident.

Two Paths in the Veda: Pravṛtti and Nivṛtti

The *dharma* of *pravṛtti* (engagement in worldly action) leads to the threefold goals: *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*. The same *karma* (ritual action) that aims at these ends can also be transformed in purpose. As the *Brāhmaṇa* says: "*ātmāyajī devayajinaḥ śreṣṭhaḥ*" — "The one who sacrifices for the Self (*ātmāyajī*) is superior to one who sacrifices for the gods (*devayajī*)." The term *ātmāyajī* refers to those who perform rituals not for external rewards, but for inner refinement.

Thus, the Vedas themselves show that *karma* yields two distinct results. While most *karmas* in the *karmakāṇḍa* aim at unseen, posthumous outcomes, certain *śāstra*-prescribed actions are linked to visible results. For instance, the *śāstra* says: "He who desires a village should perform the *saṁgrahaṇī iṣṭi*." If the village is obtained through royal patronage after the *iṣṭi*, is the cause the ritual or the patronage? The answer: both may be. The presence of a visible effort does not invalidate the scriptural cause.

Karma Done Without Desire as Preparation for Knowledge

Śāstra-ordained actions like study (*svādhyāya*), sacrifice (*yajña*), charity (*dāna*), and austerity (*tapas*) each have prescribed fruits. However, when performed without *phala-abhisandhi* (desire for fruit), they serve as preparatory disciplines for knowledge.

The *śruti* declares:

"*tameva viditvāti mṛtyumeti nānyaḥ panthā vidyate'yanāya"*
(Bṛ. Up. 4.4.22):
"The *brāhmaṇa*s seek to know that (Brahman) through the recitation of the Vedas, sacrifice, charity, and austerity."

The Gītā describes this process as *karma-yoga*. Śaṅkarācārya elaborates:

> *"abhyudayārtho'pi yaḥ pravṛttilakṣaṇo dharmo varṇāśramān diśya vihitaḥ sa devādi-sthānaprāptihetur api san īśvarārpaṇa-buddhyā anuṣṭhīyamāṇaḥ phalābhisandhi-varjitaḥ satya-śuddhaye bhavati | śuddha-sattvasya ca jñāna-niṣṭhā-yogyatāprāpti-dvāreṇa jñānotpatti-hetutvena ca niścaya-sahetutvam api pratipadyate"*

This means: Even though *pravṛtti-lakṣaṇa dharma* (duties of engagement) can lead to divine realms, when performed with dedication to Īśvara, without attachment and desire for fruits, it leads to *sattva-śuddhi* (purity of mind). This inner purity becomes the qualification (*adhikāra*) for *jñāna-niṣṭhā* (steadfastness in knowledge) and thus, the means to liberation (*mokṣa*).

The Question of Desirelessness in Karma

The Gītā teaches action without attachment or desire for results. But this appears paradoxical: if there is no ego ("I am the doer"), no attachment, and no desire, can action even arise?

Some raise this objection. But it is mistaken.

- *Karma done without desire is superior* to desire-motivated action. Desiring results is not wrong in itself—it reflects a lower level of aspiration. But those seeking higher outcomes—inner freedom—should act with renunciation of fruits and devotion to Īśvara.

This approach harmonizes both *śruti* and logic. The *smṛti* says:

“*akurvan vihitaṁ karma ninditaṁ ca samācaran | prasaktaś ca yārtheṣu naraḥ patanam ṛcchati”*

"He who omits prescribed actions, performs prohibited ones, or is attached to sense pleasures—such a person falls."

Thus, *karma* must never be abandoned, but when done for the sake of *citta-śuddhi* (purity of mind), it becomes a ladder to Vedānta.

The Role of Karma in Preparing for Vedānta

Karma fosters the inner purity (*antaḥkaraṇa-śuddhi*) needed to undertake *śravaṇa* (hearing), *manana* (reflection), and *nididhyāsana* (meditative assimilation)—the threefold method essential for Vedāntic realization. Just as a textbook is required for literacy, these threefold practices require a purified mind.

Correct Attitude in Performing Karma

Mental attitude matters more than the mere performance of ritual.

Consider *Gaṇeśa Caturthī*. Worship done from social pressure lacks both *bhakti* and *vairāgya*. Worship done for removal of obstacles is *kāma-pradhāna karma*. Worship done for Īśvara’s pleasure is *niṣkāma karma*. The Gītā prescribes this third kind of karma to *mumukṣu*s—those seeking liberation—as a means to prepare the mind for self-knowledge.

The Gītā's Emphasis on Ātma-Jñāna and the Role of Karma

According to the Ācārya, the Bhagavad Gītā primarily emphasizes **ātma-jñāna** (self-knowledge), with **karma** (action) serving as a means to cultivate appropriate **saṁskāras** (mental impressions) in the mind. The Gītā establishes the **śāstra** (scripture) as the authority for determining what actions should be performed or avoided. Disregarding the śāstra leads to neither perfection, happiness, nor the supreme goal. Faith (**śraddhā**) is crucial for karma; therefore, **yajña** (sacrifice), **dāna** (charity), and **tapas** (austerity) should be performed with faith as instructed in the śāstras. It's incorrect to view all karmas as detrimental. **Yajñādi** (sacrificial acts) are sacred; when performed without attachment and desire, they cultivate competence for knowledge.

Karma as a Means to Prepare the Mind for Knowledge

Karma fosters the appropriate *saṁskāra* for knowledge, preparing the mind. Thus, both karma and knowledge are necessary for liberation—a concept known as *karma samuccaya* (the combination of action and knowledge). However, some pre-Ācārya

commentators argued that an equal combination of knowledge and karma, performed together, leads to liberation. Here, karma refers to *varṇāśrama-vihita-karma* (duties prescribed for one's social class and stage of life). Some argue that varṇāśrama considerations should be set aside for unity, claiming that varṇāśrama-karma isn't even mentioned in the Gītā. But how can we deny ślokas like "*cāturvarṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ*" (Bhagavad Gītā 4.13) regarding varṇāśrama?

The Relevance of Varṇāśrama in the Gītā

These references cannot be dismissed. *Dharmaśāstra* (scriptures of righteousness) expounders have sometimes adjusted dharma based on differing eras. Popular figures may teach according to people's inclinations, suggesting minimal requirements. As varṇāśrama dharmas have largely faded, they might also suggest dedicating duties to the Lord. However, claiming the Gītā doesn't mention the varṇāśrama system at all is audacious. Leaving this aside, let's return to the discussion of the combination of karma and knowledge (*karma-jñāna-samuccaya)*.

Ācārya's Perspective: Knowledge as Primary, Karma as Auxiliary

The Ācārya believes the Gītā primarily emphasizes knowledge, with karma as an auxiliary. Some argue that the Ācārya's inclination toward *saṁnyāsa* (renunciation) influenced his interpretation. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, for example, wrote his Gītā commentary to support performing karma even after attaining knowledge. Śrī Kṛṣṇa, in his view, never intended to advocate karma-saṁnyāsa. If Śrī Kṛṣṇa favored saṁnyāsa like Śaṅkarācārya, he would have agreed with Arjuna's statement that begging was better, suggesting they both become saṁnyāsis and meditate in a cave. But instead, seeing that Arjuna said "Do karma itself!" ("*tasmād yudhyasva bhārata"* – Bhagavad Gītā 2.18) and so on, it becomes clear that Śrī Kṛṣṇa's intention is in karma-yoga.

Tilak's Interpretation and the Need for Further Discussion

I'm unsure if I've accurately represented Tilak's words from the Gītārahasya, as I'm relying on memory. However, Tilak certainly stated that both *karma* and *saṁnyāsa* are possible after knowledge, but the Gītā ultimately emphasizes the superiority of karma. Is it appropriate here to translate Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's view for rebuttal?

Regarding the matter of saṁnyāsa, what is the difference of opinion between him and the Ācārya? This needs to be discussed further.

46. Gītā's Knowledge and Saṁnyāsa

(13-9-53)

The Primacy of *Nivṛtti Dharma* in the Gītā

Of the two *dharma*s—*pravṛtti* (engagement) and *nivṛtti* (renunciation)—mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the primacy is clearly given to *nivṛtti dharma*, with *pravṛtti* serving as its auxiliary. This position, noted earlier, finds substantial textual support in the Gītā itself.

Knowledge (*jñāna*) Praised as Supreme

The Gītā repeatedly extols *jñāna* (knowledge) as superior. The Vedas hold *yajña* (sacrifice), *dāna* (charity), and *tapas* (austerity) as central means to the highest ends. Yet, the Gītā reinterprets these in favor of knowledge:

- "*śreyān dravyamayād yajñāj jñānayajñaḥ paraṁtapa*" (Gī. 4.33): The sacrifice of knowledge is superior to material offerings.

- "*bahavo jñānatapasā pūtā madbhāvam āgatāḥ*" (Gī. 4.10): Many have attained My nature through the penance of knowledge.

Elsewhere, knowledge is praised as *yoga*. This consistent glorification of *jñāna* across the Gītā is an important *tātparya-liṅga* (indicator of purport) in determining the intent of the scripture. Unlike *karma*, which lacks such elevated praise, *jñāna* is highlighted in both the opening and closing portions of the text.

Beginning and End Support the Primacy of *Jñāna*

The opening admonition—"*aśocyān anvaśocaḥ prajñāvādāṁś ca bhāṣase*" (Gī. 2.11)—rebukes Arjuna for grieving like the ignorant while speaking like the wise, reflecting the Upaniṣadic principle that delusion (*moha*) is destroyed by knowledge.

Similarly, in the middle of the Gītā, we find:

- "*jñānena tu tad ajñānaṁ yeṣāṁ nāśitam ātmanaḥ*" (Gī. 5.16): "Their ignorance has been destroyed by knowledge."

- "*na hi jñānena sadṛśaṁ pavitram iha vidyate*" (Gī. 4.38): “There is no purifier like knowledge.”

Finally, Arjuna’s declaration "*naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtir labdhā*" (Gī. 18.73) — "My delusion is gone; memory has returned" — at the conclusion further affirms that it is knowledge that accomplishes inner transformation.

Karma as Auxiliary: A Tool for Inner Purity

Though *karma* is given importance, it is shown to be subservient. In the Gītā, the fruit of *karma* is not *ātmasiddhi* (Self-realization), but rather *citta-śuddhi* (purification of the mind), as stated in "*yoginaḥ karma kurvanti saṅgaṁ tyaktvā’ātmaśuddhaye*" (Gī. 5.11).

Jñāna-yoga, *karma-yoga*, *dhyāna-yoga*, and *bhakti-yoga* are all ultimately directed toward Self-knowledge:

- "*tatte svayaṁ yogasaṁsiddhaḥ kālenātmani vindati*" (Gī. 4.38)

- "*yat cittaikāgraṁ viśuddhaḥ*" (Gī. 6.12)

- "*bhaktyā mām abhijānāti*" (Gī. 18.55)

Nowhere is *jñāna* subordinated to *karma*; it is never said to depend on the latter for its fruit.

The Nature and Fruit of Knowledge

"*etad buddhvā buddhimān syāt kṛtakṛtyaś ca bhārata*" (Gī. 15.20) — “Having known this, one becomes wise and accomplished” — shows that *jñāna* alone leads to *parama-puruṣārtha* (supreme human goal). Thus, analyzing the *vākyārtha* (sentence meaning), we find that Śaṅkara’s interpretation—placing *jñāna* at the center—is both coherent and faithful to the text.

It is essential to now consider what *jñāna* (knowledge) and *saṁnyāsa* (renunciation) mean according to Ācārya Śaṅkara, especially since many assume that the Gītā debates whether one should abandon or retain karma after gaining knowledge.

Jñāna is the realization of the Self (*ātman*). The final verses of the fifteenth chapter (Gī. 15.19–20) describe this as the recognition of the *puruṣottama*—the Self that is distinct from both the perishable (*kṣara*) and imperishable (*akṣara*) aspects of existence.

- *Kṣara*: The manifest forms—bodies, aggregates of causes and effects—which perish over time.

- *Akṣara*: The unmanifest state during dissolution, not constrained by space-time, yet still part of the empirical realm.

Both *kṣara* and *akṣara* belong to the domain of *anātman* (non-Self), being the objects of consciousness. They are not the Self, though mistakenly identified as such.

Hence, the Self beyond both *kṣara* and *akṣara* is the *puruṣottama*—the nondual, transcendental reality. To know this is to become *sarvavit* (knower of all), because nothing truly exists apart from the Self. This alone is *ātmajñāna*, the essential message of the fifteenth chapter.

The Field and the Knower of the Field

Similarly, "*kṣetra-kṣetrajñayor jñānaṁ yat tad jñānaṁ mataṁ mama*" (Gī. 13.2) — “The knowledge of the *kṣetra* (field) and *kṣetrajña* (knower of the field) is true knowledge,” affirms that:

- *Kṣetra* includes all that is objectifiable—body, mind, elements, and their modifications.

- *Kṣetrajña* is the witnessing Self—eternal, conscious, and uniform across all beings.

This *kṣetrajña*, though appearing as the *jīva*, is in reality the *paramātman*.

The Ninth Chapter's Contribution

The ninth chapter also reiterates *ātmajñāna* in its unique metaphysical language: the *paramātman* pervades all beings, yet remains unaffected by them. "*mayā tatam idaṁ sarvaṁ*" (Gī. 9.4) and "*na ca matsthāni bhūtāni*" (Gī. 9.5) declare this subtle truth: while all

beings exist in the Self, the Self is not contained in them. *Anātman* is entirely dependent on *ātman*, while *ātman* is completely independent.

This, then, is the Self—unrelated, unaffected, non-dual. Knowing this, delusion ceases, and liberation is attained.

The Question of Action After Self-Knowledge

Once one has come to recognize that the Self of such a nature is indeed "I," and after realizing that name, form, and action (*nāma-rūpa-karma*) have no connection to one's essential nature (*svarūpa*), the question may naturally arise: Should one still perform *karma*, or abandon it? This doubt deserves careful consideration—especially with regard to the meaning of the word *saṁnyāsa*.

Misconceptions About Saṁnyāsa

Because *saṁnyāsa* is often taken to mean "not doing any *karma*", some mistakenly believe that Śaṅkarācārya promotes an *āśrama* fit for idle people who shun activity. Others argue that after gaining knowledge (*jñāna*), one may either take *saṁnyāsa* or continue to perform *karma*, and that while remaining in *jñāna* is certainly superior, performing selfless *karma* (*karmayoga*) for the maintenance of the world is also valid—even preferable. They claim that both paths lead to *mokṣa*, and both are sanctioned by tradition.

However, in Śaṅkarācārya's view, the *ātmajñāna* (knowledge of the Self) once attained, reveals that name, form, and action have no relation to the Self. Hence, for such a *jñānī*, the question of whether to act or abstain does not even arise. The *saṁnyāsa* he teaches is not an act to be done or renounced; rather, as the Gītā says:

> *sarvakarmāṇi manasā saṁnyasyāste sukhaṁ vaśī*
> *navadvāre pure dehī naiva kurvan na kārayan* (Gītā 5.13)
>
> "Having mentally renounced all actions, the self-controlled one rests happily in the city of nine gates, doing nothing, nor causing anything to be done."

This *saṁnyāsa* is a mental renunciation (*mānasika-saṁnyāsa*), not a cessation of outward activity. Again, the Gītā affirms:

> *karmaṇy akarma yaḥ paśyed akarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ*
> *sa buddhimān manuṣyeṣu sa yuktaḥ kṛtsnakarmakṛt* (Gītā 4.18)
> "He who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is the wise one among men; he is the accomplished performer of all action."

Saṁnyāsa as Mental Renunciation

This clearly means: knowing that *karma* has no place in the *ātman*, one must renounce all *karma* connected with the ego. Even while the body appears to act, no action is truly being done.

If one recognizes this Self, *sarvakarmasaṁnyāsa* (complete renunciation of all action) naturally takes place. Ācārya explicitly denies that this renunciation results merely from idleness or abstaining from physical work. Some have even misread "sarvakarmāṇi dehe

saṁnyasya” to mean “placing all actions in the body”—an error arising from not knowing the proper root meaning. Though *nyas* means "to place," Ācārya has clarified that *saṁnyas* with the prefix *sam-* means “to abandon.”

This *saṁnyāsa* refers only to inner renunciation—not to the abandonment of speech or physical action. Still, since all action proceeds from thought, one who has mentally renounced all *karma* (*saṁnyāsin*) cannot truly act at all. The Gītā’s phrase “*naiva kurvan na kārayan*” (“neither acting nor causing to act”) stresses this total renunciation, leaving no room for doubt.

Had one properly understood that Ācārya’s *saṁnyāsa* is mental, misinterpretation would have been impossible. This does not mean abandoning worldly activity altogether—everyone necessarily acts in some form. Nor is this about giving up one’s livelihood. Ācārya has taught in the Gītā that *mokṣa* arises from self-knowledge, supported by *sarvakarmasaṁnyāsa*. What exactly is this renunciation?

At the time of the Gītā’s teaching, concerns like “how will I earn a living?” were irrelevant. Arjuna’s problem was not laziness; it was a crisis of *dharma*. He questioned whether fighting was sinful, and whether begging was a nobler alternative. In response, Bhagavān revealed the true meaning of *karma*, and the fruit of *karmayoga*—purity of mind (*citta-śuddhi*).

Abandoning Action ≠ Abandoning the World

The Gītā teaches the supreme goal of human life as arising from the complete renunciation of all action. Here, “renouncing action” is tantamount to “renouncing the world.” And the world, being composed of *nāma*, *rūpa*, and *karma*, cannot be simply set aside or clung to.

For instance, doctors recently advised me to pause lectures for a few days due to chest pain. That is within my control. But can the world be abandoned in that way? Certainly not. People suffer from attachment to a world believed to be real, driven by desire and anger—like dogs fighting over scraps. Those adept in exploiting others for personal gain are called clever businessmen.

However, those who renounce identification with the body and realize that there is a *caitanya* (consciousness) completely distinct from body, senses, and mind—one that is all-pervading and alone the truth—come to know that this world of name, form, and action is not independent of that Self, and therefore unreal. For such persons, who have given up all false pride and identification with this world, the connection with *karma* is entirely severed. **That alone is true saṁnyāsa.**

Is This Merely a Personal View?

One may ask: is the explanation just offered merely a personal view? Or does it reflect the intent of Ācārya in his *Gītābhāṣya*? To dispel such doubts, we must carefully examine the context and structure of the **fifth chapter** of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Arjuna’s Question: Karma or Renunciation?

In verse 5.1, Arjuna raises a critical question:

saṁnyāsaṁ karmaṇāṁ kṛṣṇa punar yogaṁ ca śaṁsasi
yac chreya etayor ekam tan me brūhi suniścitam (Gītā 5.1)

"O Krishna, you praise both the renunciation (*saṁnyāsa*) of actions and *karma-yoga* again and again. Tell me decisively—which of these two is better?"

To this, Bhagavān replies:

saṁnyāsaḥ karmayogaś ca niḥśreyasakarāv ubhau
tayos tu karma-saṁnyāsāt karma-yogo viśiṣyate (Gītā 5.2)

"Both *saṁnyāsa* and *karma-yoga* lead to liberation; but of the two, *karma-yoga* is more distinguished (*viśiṣyate*)."

Interpreting the Gītā's Context: Who is the Teaching For?

These are not controversial verses; they are **accepted even in Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's commentary**. However, some interpret *viśiṣyate* as indicating superiority in all respects. But such an interpretation fails to consider the Gītā's larger context—before and after.

From the outset, Bhagavān distinguishes between teachings suited for two types of aspirants:

"I have already taught *jñāna-yoga* to the *sāṁkhyas* and *karma-yoga* to the *karmi-s*."

Thus, *it is not appropriate* to assume that both *jñāna-yoga* and *karma-yoga* apply equally to the same person, or that *karma-yoga* is superior in all respects.

The Ātman is Actionless

Earlier, in the section on *sāṅkhyabuddhi*, the Lord declares:

*na jāyate mriyate vā kadācit (*Gītā 2.20)

"It is never born, nor does it die."

This affirms that the *ātman* is free of all modifications (*vikāra*). If that is the case, *how can there be any karma for one who knows the Self to be thus***?** Actions arise only through identification with the body. But the *jñānī* knows:

"I am not subject to the birth, aging, and death of the body."

This is the essence of *sāṅkhyajñāna*. To suggest that such a one has *karma* to perform is not merely erroneous—it is logically incoherent.

In verse 2.21, this is made explicit:

vedāvināśinaṁ nityaṁ ya enam ajam avyayam
kathaṁ sa puruṣaḥ pārtha kaṁ ghātayati hanti kam

"He who knows the Self as indestructible, eternal, unborn, and immutable—how can he slay or cause anyone to be slain?"

Thus, there is no connection with action (*karma-saṅga*) for the knower of the Self (*jñānī*).

Ācārya's Declaration on Karma and the Jñānī

Therefore, when the Gītā states that both *saṁnyāsa* and *karma-yoga* are means to liberation, *it is not referring to the same adhikārī (*qualified aspirant). For the *jñānī*, *karma* has no function or relevance.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya makes this crystal clear:

ātmatattvavidaḥ samyagdarśana-viruddho mithyājñāna-hetukaḥ karmayogaḥ svapne'pi na saṁbhāvayituṁ śakyate

"For the one who knows the truth of the Self (*ātmatattvavit*), *karma-yoga*, which is opposed to right knowledge (*samyagdarśana*) and arises from false knowledge (*mithyājñāna*), *cannot even be imagined in a dream.*"

This is the **decisive conclusion** of Śaṅkara: for the *jñānī*, *karma-yoga* is not merely unnecessary—it is impossible.

True Knowledge and the Meaning of *Saṃnyāsa*

Let us not be mistaken: **knowledge (*jñāna*)** does not mean the information derived from *nigama*, *nirukta*, *vyākaraṇa*, or other ancillary disciplines. **True knowledge of the Self (*ātmajñāna*)** is the direct experience of one's real nature. When that *ātmajñāna* arises, all false notions (*mithyājñāna*) about the Self (*ātman*) are completely destroyed.

"*janmādi-sarva-vikriyā-rahitasya niṣkriyātmānam-ātreṇa yo vetti tasyāḥ ātma-vidaḥ samyagdarśanena apāsta-mithyājñānasya niṣkriyātmā-svarūpāvasthāna-lakṣaṇaṃ sarvakarma-saṃnyāsa-mukta*"

– For one who knows the Self as devoid of birth and all modifications, and abides in that inactive (*niṣkriya*) Self by virtue of right knowledge (*samyagdarśana*), **renunciation of all action (*sarvakarma-saṃnyāsa*)** naturally follows.

This *sarvakarma-saṃnyāsa* is not the external abandonment of duties or physical idleness. Nor is it disidentifying from wealth, status, or the world out of laziness. A humorous example illustrates this well: two lazy men lay on the ground waiting for jujube fruits to fall into their mouths by wind. One grew jealous of the other—"Why doesn't he put that fallen fruit into my mouth?" Who would confuse such sloth with the renunciation taught in Vedānta?

True *sarvakarma-saṃnyāsa* is the natural state that arises from *niṣkriyātma-jñāna*—the knowledge of the inactive, actionless Self—not from a change of clothing or symbolic withdrawal.

Why the Gītā Repeats *Karma* and *Karma-saṃnyāsa*

Although it has been explained that **karma** is a means to **Self-knowledge**, and that knowledge naturally leads to **renunciation of all karma**, the Bhagavad Gītā repeatedly discusses both *karma* and *karma-saṃnyāsa*. Thus, it becomes necessary to examine and refine our understanding of these terms.

Misunderstanding *Karma* and *Akarma*

Many fail to grasp the difference between *karma* (action) and *akarma* (inaction), or worse—confuse one for the other. The Gītā itself addresses this:

> *karmaṇy akarma yaḥ paśyet karmaṇi ca akarma yaḥ,*
> *sa buddhimān manuṣyeṣu sa yuktaḥ kṛtsna-karma-kṛt* (Gītā 4.18)

"He who sees inaction in action and action in inaction—he is the wise one among men; he is the true performer of all actions."

At first glance, this may appear nonsensical. How can action be seen as inaction, or vice versa? It seems as absurd as calling someone running with a flaming torch through a haystack the wisest of children! But the verse points to a deeper truth.

Just as when sitting in a moving train, the trees outside seem to move backwards, or two trains moving at equal speed seem still—*karma* can appear to be *akarma*, and vice versa. What appears as activity in the world may in fact be *inaction*, and what appears as withdrawal may be riddled with latent activity.

The True Meaning of *Karma-saṃnyāsa*

Many assume that not doing anything is *akarma*, but **even idleness is an action** of the *kāryakaraṇa-saṅghāta*—the psychophysical apparatus. Merely ceasing physical actions does not constitute *karma-saṃnyāsa*.

The scriptures declare that *true renunciation involves giving up the three eṣaṇās*—desires for the three worlds: this world (*loka*), the world of ancestors (*pitṛloka*), and the world of gods (*devaloka*). One who has renounced all three through *ātma-jñāna* alone is the true *karma-saṃnyāsin*.

So, what is *karma*? It is the activity performed through the instruments of action and knowledge (*kāryakaraṇa*). On deeper inquiry, this *karma* belongs only to the seen instruments, not to the witnessing Self. The *Self, as pure consciousness, is actionless.* One who knows this is a *non-doer* (*akarmī*), from his standpoint, even if he appears to perform *karma*. Without this knowledge, giving up external actions does not sever internal tendencies (*vāsanā*). These latent impressions can propel one into activity, whether one acts outwardly or not, or even remain lazy without any action.

A well-known story illustrates this: a *saṃnyāsin* who formerly dealt with fishermen in his previous *āśrama* walked past some boys beating a turtle. Despite thinking, "This is none of my concern, I’m a *saṃnyāsin*," he couldn't resist and blurted out, "That’s not how you hit a

turtle—it lets go only if you flip it over first!" Such is the force of *karma-vāsanā*! Even so-called renunciates, unless illumined by knowledge, are caught in their past conditioning.

Therefore, merely saying, "I have no *karma* now," does not make one free of action. *The lazy and the ignorant may think so, but unless vāsanās are dissolved by knowledge, they remain doers (karmīs).* Conversely, a *jñānī* may appear to perform action, but having abandoned all agency, he is a true *karma-saṃnyāsin*.

Jñānī and Sarvakarma-Saṃnyāsa

For the *jñānī*, *sarvakarma-saṃnyāsa* is not a deliberate choice—it is the *spontaneous fruit of knowledge*. The notion that *karma* and *saṃnyāsa* coexist in the *jñānī* is logically contradictory. Therefore, the question—"Should a knower of the Self perform *karma* or abandon it?"—simply does not arise.

Clarifying the Gītā's Statement on Karma-Yoga and Saṃnyāsa

A common question arises regarding the Gītā's statement:
*"Of the two, karma-yoga is distinguished from karma-saṃnyāsa" (*5.2). How should this be understood?

Ācārya's interpretation is crucial here. As already noted, for one who has attained *ātmajñāna*—the realization "I am the Self that is actionless (*niṣkriya*)"—there is no longer any taint of *karma*. Thus, the Lord's statement about both *karma-yoga* and *karma-saṃnyāsa* leading to *niḥśreyasa* (liberation) is directed not toward the *jñānī*, but toward the aspirant who has not yet realized the Self.

Why is karma-yoga said to be superior? Śaṅkara clarifies that *karma-saṃnyāsa* undertaken before Self-knowledge is difficult to practice. It includes partial renunciation, observance of *yama* and *niyama*, and often arises while the sense of doership (*kartṛtva*) still lingers. Therefore, the Lord declares *karma-yoga* as more accessible for such aspirants—not as intrinsically higher, but as easier and thus more effective for most.

The Meaning of Arjuna's Question in Chapter 5

When Arjuna asks:
"saṃnyāsaṁ karmaṇāṁ kṛṣṇa punar yogaṁ ca śaṁsasi |
yac chreya etayor ekaṁ tan me brūhi suniścitam ||" (5.1)
("O Kṛṣṇa, you praise both the renunciation of actions and *karma-yoga*. Please tell me clearly which of these two is better.")

—he is not asking from the standpoint of a *jñānī*. He is an aspirant seeking the highest good (*śreyas*). The Lord replies:
"saṃnyāsaḥ karma-yogaś ca niḥśreyasa-karāv ubhau |
tayos tu karma-saṃnyāsāt karma-yogo viśiṣyate ||" (5.2)

That is, both lead to liberation, but *karma-yoga* is more effective for one who has not yet realized the Self.

The Nature of Preliminary Saṃnyāsa

This is not *sarva-karma-saṃnyāsa* as described for the *jñānī*, but a preparatory *āśrama-saṃnyāsa* undertaken by a seeker. Such a person has not eradicated the *ahaṅkāra* (ego), nor the sense of agency. He merely abandons household duties and turns to *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana* for Self-realization. But since this path is arduous, the Lord prescribes *karma-yoga* for most seekers.

The verse:
"jñeyaḥ sa nitya-saṃnyāsī yo na dveṣṭi na kāṅkṣati |
nirdvandvo hi mahā-bāho sukhaṁ bandhāt pramucyate ||" (5.3)

"O Arjuna, he who neither hates nor desires anything is truly a *nitya-saṃnyāsī*, even while engaged in action; for such a one easily transcends all dualities and becomes free from bondage" — in this way, the Lord praises *karma-yoga* (BhG 5.3). It is crucial to recognize that *saṃnyāsa* is not being denigrated here. Rather, by extolling the *karma-yogin* as a *saṃnyāsī*, the inherent greatness of *saṃnyāsa* is indirectly acknowledged.

However, the *saṃnyāsa* being referred to in this context is not the principal or formal *saṃnyāsa*, but a secondary one. In this, the sense of doership (*kartṛtva-buddhi*) has not yet been eradicated. Thus, the seeker must still renounce *gārhasthya-karma* (householder duties) and engage in *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana* in pursuit of *jñāna* (Self-knowledge).

Karma-Yoga as a More Accessible Path

For those lacking firmness of mind, control over the senses, and the inward disposition necessary for sustained *ātma-vicāra* (Self-inquiry), *karma-yoga* is more suitable than embracing the external marks of *āśrama-saṃnyāsa*. Through the disciplined performance of *karma-yoga*, liberation (*mokṣa*) can be more readily attained—this is the considered view of the Lord.

Unfortunately, many mistake the mere acceptance of the *saṃnyāsa-āśrama* for spiritual fulfillment. Some believe *saṃnyāsa* to be an unregulated *āśrama*, to be assumed at will or out of convenience. There are those who, when faced with illness, presume they qualify for "*ātura-saṃnyāsa*" (emergency renunciation). Others interpret family hardship or failure in worldly affairs as license to renounce.

Misconceptions About Saṃnyāsa

Still others adopt the ochre robe, *daṇḍa*, and *kamaṇḍalu* merely as symbolic attire, falsely believing these outward signs confer true renunciation. Some even imagine that leading political movements constitutes their proper *saṃnyāsa-karma*! But in truth, only those committed to *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana*, and who have sincerely cultivated *yama* and *niyama*, are fit for *saṃnyāsa-āśrama*. Others should firmly abstain from it.

Is Formal Saṃnyāsa Necessary for Jñāna?

Must one necessarily adopt *saṃnyāsa* in order to attain *ātma-jñāna*? The *Gītā* does not advocate this view. On the contrary, the declaration "*karma-yogo viśiṣyate*"—"*karma-yoga* is superior" (BhG 5.2)—serves as a direct response. One may attain *jñānayogyatā* (fitness for knowledge) by performing actions in a spirit of offering to *Īśvara* (*Īśvarārpaṇa-buddhi*),

or alternatively, by adopting *karma-saṃnyāsa* and then engaging in the necessary practices for realization.

In practice, *karma-yoga* is more accessible and effective for most aspirants. This is why the *Gītā* praises it as *viśiṣyate* (distinct/superior). Some argue that in the *Kali Yuga*, *karma* is no longer viable and only *karma-saṃnyāsa* is possible. But such a claim must be scrutinized: has *karma* truly become impossible?

Guarding Against False Vedāntic Renunciation

Recently, many self-proclaimed '*Vedāntins*' have begun denouncing even essential *karmas* like *sandhyā-vandana*, declaring them obsolete. This attitude is entirely mistaken. Those who reject the *śāstrīya-karmas* (scripturally enjoined duties) are neither authentic *Vedāntins* nor faithful *Vaidikas*. A true seeker (*mumukṣu*) gains nothing from listening to such denouncers of *karma*.

Instead, one should sincerely perform *śāstroktakarma* (Vedic duties) as offerings to *Parameśvara*. Such action purifies the *antaḥkaraṇa* (inner instrument) and prepares the mind for *tattva-vicāra* (inquiry into reality). As the mind is purified, *vairāgya* (dispassion) will naturally arise, leading the aspirant into *āntaraṅga-sādhana*—the subtle inner discipline required for liberation.

48. Lokasangraharthakarma

(15-9-53)

The Timing and Nature of Renunciation

When Arjuna inquired whether *saṃnyāsa* (renunciation) or *karma-yoga* (disciplined action) was superior for the attainment of *mokṣa* (liberation), Bhagavān responded that both are effective means for liberation. However, for one who has already realized the nature of the *paramātman* (supreme Self) through *sāṃkhyabuddhi* (discriminative intellect) and abides in *paramārtha-saṃnyāsa* (ultimate renunciation) as the changeless, actionless Self, the question itself becomes irrelevant.

Vidvat-saṃnyāsa—renunciation undertaken upon attaining Self-knowledge—is not performed. It naturally follows the dawn of realization. On the other hand, while the notion of doership (*kartṛtva*) persists, one may take up *vividiṣā-saṃnyāsa*, the renunciation undertaken with the intent to pursue *śravaṇa* (listening to scripture), *manana* (reflection), and *nididhyāsana* (meditative assimilation). This involves renouncing *gārhasthya-karma* (household duties) and embracing the *paramahaṃsa-pārivrājaka* lifestyle.

There is also *tridaṇḍi-saṃnyāsa*, an *āśrama* that retains *śikhā* (tuft of hair), *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread), and other *karmic* symbols, and which leads to *brahmaloka* as its fruit. However, the Gītā's discourse is primarily concerned with *karma-saṃnyāsa* as a direct means to liberation (*mokṣa*).

Why Karma-Yoga Is Considered Superior

Even though both *saṃnyāsa* and *karma-yoga*, when practiced correctly, lead to *niḥśreyasa* (supreme good), *saṃnyāsa* demands an intense degree of *amānatva* (humility), *śama-dama* (mental and sensory restraint), and inner renunciation—requirements that are not easy for all aspirants. Hence, Bhagavān says:

> *saṃnyāsas tu mahābāho duḥkham āptum ayogataḥ*
> "O mighty-armed one, *saṃnyāsa* is difficult to attain without *yoga*." (Gītā 5.6)

Thus, *karma-yoga* becomes the preparatory path that gradually matures into true renunciation.

When Should One Renounce?

One should renounce when *vairāgya* (dispassion) arises. As the *śruti* declares:

> *yad ahar eva virajet tad ahar eva pravrajet*
> "On the very day one becomes dispassionate, on that very day one should renounce."

This *vairāgya* must be genuine—born not from the fatigue of worldly burdens, but from deep understanding of the futility of desiring the fruits of *karma*.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahaṃsa recounts a tale illustrating true dispassion:
A husband and wife were speaking in private. The wife expressed concern that her brother, who had begun renouncing things one by one, might soon take *saṃnyāsa*. The husband reassured her: "Those who truly renounce don't become dispassionate like that." The wife asked, "Then what do they do?" The husband immediately rose from the bed and walked out of the house. That, said Ramakrishna, is true renunciation—sudden, total, and irrevocable.

The Paramārtha-Saṃnyāsin Has Nothing to Do

The one established in *paramārtha-saṃnyāsa* has nothing left to accomplish—neither in this world nor in the next. For such a *jñānī*, the *śāstra*-prescribed *karmas* serve no purpose. Whether a householder or a *brahmacārī*, if Self-knowledge dawns, that person becomes a true renunciate by nature.

As the Gītā puts it:

> *nirāśīḥ yata-cittātmā tyakta-sarva-parigrahaḥ |*
> *śārīraṁ kevalaṁ karma kurvan nāpnoti kilbiṣam ||* (Gītā 4.21)

"He who has no expectations, whose body, mind, and intellect are under control, who has renounced all possessions—such a person incurs no sin even while engaged in mere bodily action."

The *jñānī* has no *mamatā* (possessiveness) toward anything. Ordinary people, however, constantly shift their sense of "mine" from one object to another. As long as an object is in one's possession, one feels "this is mine." The moment it leaves, the *mamatā* transfers to something else—this shifting sense of identity with objects is a universal delusion.

Edward Carpenter, in *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure*, remarks that civilization is a kind of disease and *mamatā* is its cause. He praises Bharata Khaṇḍa (India) as a land that has

found a cure through the spiritual insights of its sages. Yet, it cannot be said that all inhabitants are free from *mamatā*. Only those who have directly realized that the all-pervading *Paramātman* is none other than their own Self can be called *paramahaṃsas*—those who have transcended all *parigraha* (possessiveness).

What Is the Body? A Vedāntic Clarification

All that is falsely identified as "I" and "mine" due to attachment is part of the body—not just the physical form, but the entire construct of misidentification.

This is the teaching of the Bhagavad Gītā:

> *mahābhūtānyahaṅkāro buddhiravyaktameva ca |*
> *indriyāṇi daśaikaṁ ca pañca cendriyagocarāḥ ||* (Gītā 13.5)
>
> *icchā dveṣaḥ sukhaṁ duḥkhaṁ saṅghātaś cetanā dhṛtiḥ |*
> *etat kṣetraṁ samāsena sa-vikāram udāhṛtam ||* (Gītā 13.6)

All that is described in these verses—the five great elements, ego, intellect, the unmanifest, the ten senses, the mind, the sense objects, desire, aversion, pleasure, pain, the bodily aggregate, consciousness, and fortitude—is referred to as the *kṣetra* (field), which constitutes both the gross body (*sthūla-śarīra*) and the subtle body (*sūkṣma-śarīra*). Everything apart from the witnessing *ātman* falls under the domain of the *śarīra*.

The Relationship between the Knower and the Known

The Lord declares that all beings—sentient and insentient—arise from the union of the *kṣetra* and *kṣetrajña* (the field and its knower). But what is the nature of this union?

It is not a physical conjunction like a book being grasped by a hand. It is also not an eternal inherence like a quality in a substance or a class in its members. Rather, the relationship is one of *adhyāsa* (superimposition), as explained by the teachers of Vedānta:

> "The relationship between the *kṣetra* and the *kṣetrajña*, which are of different natures as object and subject, is one of mutual superimposition of their respective attributes. This *sambandha* (connection) arises due to *aviveka* (non-discrimination) between the two, similar to mistaking a rope for a snake or nacre for silver. Such superimposition is *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge)."

Thus, the Self (*brahman*), which is devoid of all limiting adjuncts and defined as "*na sat tan nāsad ucyate*" ("neither being nor non-being"), must be separated from the *kṣetra*, just as the stalk is separated from *munja* grass.

Only one who discerns this, seeing the world like a dream or an illusory elephant, dispels *mithyājñāna* through the light of *samyagdarśana* (right vision).

False Notions and the Ego of 'Mine'

Those who harbor *ahaṅkāra* (ego) and *mamatā* (mineness) are clouded by *mithyājñāna*. Such delusion is portrayed powerfully in the Sanskrit drama *Bharthṛhari-Nirveda*. In it, King Bharthṛhari, upon hearing of his wife's death due to her fidelity, descends into grief and madness, refusing even cremation and instead hugging her corpse. At that moment, he meets the sage Gorakṣa crying over a broken pot, claiming it was too dear to live without.

The king mocks his behavior—only to realize, through the sages' rebuke, that he himself was acting in the same manner toward a corpse.

This powerful moment sparks intense *vairāgya* (dispassion), and the king renounces his kingdom and takes up the path of renunciation under the guidance of the sages.

The Fruit of Maturity: Natural Renunciation

In the one whose mind is ripened by *puṇya* (spiritual merit) and illumined by *ātma-jñāna*, *vairāgya* arises naturally. Such a person abandons all actions born of desire for fruits, whether in this world or the next. Performing only such minimal activities like begging required for the maintenance of the body, they live absorbed in *jñāna-niṣṭhā* (abidance in knowledge), awaiting the exhaustion of their *prārabdha-karma*.

This is not a forced austerity but the spontaneous expression of an inner fullness.

Householder and the Arising of Knowledge

It may happen that a *gṛhastha* (householder), while actively engaged in the duties of his *āśrama*, attains *jñāna* (Self-knowledge). Although, for him, no further benefit remains to be gained from action (*karma*), certain worldly obligations may prevent him from renouncing *karma* altogether. For instance, he may have elderly parents to care for, with no one else to serve them. In such situations, he continues his duties as before.

Although he performs actions externally, they yield him no inner benefit, for *jñāna* has already destroyed the notion of doership and all karmic bondage. Still, such action has a significant social value—it pleases the *sādhu*s (virtuous), and inspires *laukika* (ordinary) people to revere and emulate dharmic action. This kind of action, done without attachment, solely to maintain the order of the world, is called **lokasaṅgraha-karma**—action for the welfare and cohesion of society.

Misconceptions about Lokasaṅgraha-karma

In modern times, the idea of *lokasaṅgraha-karma* has been gravely misunderstood. Some claim to be enlightened (*jñānī*s) and renounce all *karma*, declaring, “I am Self-realized, hence I do not act.” But when someone visits their home, they suddenly begin reciting a *Sahasra Gāyatrī* as a performance for reputation. Such individuals are not *jñānī*s but *mithyācārins*—hypocrites—who pretend to act out of enlightenment, while being inwardly attached to the very karma they claim to have renounced. Their fall from the path of *karma* is complete.

A true *jñānī*, even while remaining in the householder’s *āśrama*, performs actions outwardly like any other *gṛhastha*. Yet, these actions do not touch him. They are *jñānāgnidagdhakarma*—actions burnt in the fire of knowledge. He has no attachment to *karma*, nor desire for any fruit (*phalābhisandhi*), for his mind abides in Self-knowledge.

Vision of the Enlightened in Action

The Bhagavad Gītā beautifully describes the outlook of such a *jñānī* performing action:

> *brahmārpaṇaṁ brahma havir brahmāgnau brahmaṇā hutam |*
> *brahmaiva tena gantavyaṁ brahma-karma-samādhinā ||* (Gītā 4.24)

That which is used as the offering (*arpaṇam*) is Brahman, the clarified butter (*havis*) is Brahman, the fire (*agni*) into which the offering is made is Brahman, the one who offers is Brahman, and the goal to be attained is also Brahman. For the *brahma-karma-samādhī*—the one who is wholly absorbed in the understanding that all *karma* is Brahman—there is no agent, no instrument, and no fruit distinct from the Self. Everything is seen as *brahma-svarūpa* (of the nature of Brahman).

Just as one who initially mistook a nacre for silver, upon realizing the truth, no longer perceives any silver—so too the *jñānī* perceives no real *karma*, no real doer or deed. For him, all is Brahman.

The True Renunciate

Thus, even a *jñānī* performing *lokasaṅgraha-karma* remains a true *saṁnyāsin* from the standpoint of *pāramārthika satya* (ultimate reality). He is no longer bound by *pravṛtti* (worldly engagement), though his body continues to function like a wheel set in motion.

Indeed, the scriptures declare that there are those devoted to *pravṛtti* (engagement in the world) and those devoted to *nivṛtti* (renunciation). But even among those who appear to be *pravṛttimārga*-based householders, if they are *jñānīs*, they are ultimately renouncers (*nivṛttimārgī*s) by vision and by the truth they abide in

Those who mistakenly assume that Śaṅkarācārya holds only those who have abandoned all actions and donned the ochre robe to be true *jñānins* (knowers of the Self) must carefully reflect upon the true purport of *lokasaṅgraha-karma* as taught by the Ācārya.

Mere outward symbols of renunciation—such as the *kaupīna* (ochre cloth), *daṇḍa* (staff), or *kamaṇḍalu* (water pot)—do not make one a real *saṃnyāsin*. One who lacks faith in *karma*, even while performing action, cannot be considered a true *gṛhastha* (householder) either. Outward affiliation to an *āśrama* does not establish one's status as a renunciate or householder in the true Vedāntic sense.

The Knower Beyond All Āśrama Classifications

A *jñānī*—whether remaining as a *gṛhastha* or appearing as a *paramahaṃsa* in the fourth *āśrama*—is always a *saṃnyāsin* from the standpoint of the *pāramārthika satya* (ultimate reality). From the highest truth, he has renounced everything through right knowledge, even if outwardly engaged in worldly duties or clad in the robes of a mendicant.

46. The Goal of Karma Yoga

(16-9-53)

Understanding Ultimate Reality Beyond Name, Form, and Action

The knowledge that liberation (*mokṣa*) results from realizing the Self (*ātman*) as untouched by name (*nāma*), form (*rūpa*), and action (*karma*) is central to the teaching of the *Gītā*. When such knowledge arises, there is no need to instruct anyone to either perform or renounce action. Why? Because in the world, all beings are ceaselessly active by nature.

As the *Gītā* declares:
“na hi kaścit kṣaṇam api jātu tiṣṭhaty akarmakṛt” (BhG 3.5) —
“No one can ever remain, even for a moment, without performing action.”

This statement should not be misread as a prescription that *karma* must be done. Rather, it is a description of the inevitability of action. The actual import of the scripture lies not in merely affirming that action happens, but in teaching how one ought to act. After all, what is the purpose of a *pramāṇa* (valid means of knowledge), if not to reveal that which is otherwise unknown? It is to this end that *śāstra*, as a *pramāṇa*, reveals the method, purpose, and orientation of action.

Karma and Human Agency

The sense of doership (*kartṛtva*) and enjoyership (*bhoktṛtva*) is present instinctively in all sentient beings—not only in humans, but even in animals and birds. But which actions should be undertaken, and which avoided? This discernment is not innate; it is taught by *śāstra* alone.

The *śāstra* also teaches that if a certain result is desired, a specific kind of *karma* must be performed. *Karma* falls under *puruṣatantra*—it is subject to human volition. An individual may choose to perform it, ignore it, or even act in opposition. A Brahmin boy, while eating, was once seen mentally counting *prāṇāgnihotra* offerings aloud in English—"One, two, three..." The *śāstra* could not stop him! This illustrates how powerful attachment (*rāga*) and aversion (*dveṣa*) are in motivating human behavior.

Ultimately, this world of action is driven by these two forces—*rāga* and *dveṣa*. Recognizing this, the scriptures—tailoring obligatory (*nitya*) and optional (*kāmya*) actions to the inclinations and competencies of various aspirants—prescribe *karma-yoga* to those desirous of liberation. This is entirely natural and appropriate.

The Self as Untouched by Karma

Both *Veda* and *śāstra*, along with the realization of enlightened beings, proclaim that the Self has no intrinsic relationship with name, form, or action. This truth becomes evident to those endowed with *Sāṃkhya-buddhi*—the discriminative intellect oriented toward the *paramārtha-tattva* (ultimate reality). For such aspirants, ignorance (*avidyā*) is completely dispelled by the recognition of the real nature of the Self.

Desire (*kāma*) arises only from ignorance. From desire, action springs. Therefore, one whose *Sāṃkhya-buddhi* is fully awakened—one who sees the Self as separate from the non-Self—has no desires whatsoever. Such a person is called a *sthitaprajña*—one established in unwavering wisdom.

The Desireless Sage: Stithaprajña

In describing the *sthitaprajña*, Lord Krishna says:

*“prajahāti yadā kāmān sarvān pārtha mano-gatān” (*BhG 2.55) —
"O Pārtha, when a person gives up all desires that dwell in the mind..."

It is important to note that the *Gītā* says *sarvān kāmān*—**all** desires. Some misinterpret this to mean only 'bad' desires are to be given up. But neither the *Gītā* nor the *śruti* support this restricted reading. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* affirms:

"yadā sarve pramucyante kāmā ye'sya hṛdi śritāḥ" —
"When all desires that dwell in the heart are released…"

Desires reside in the *antaḥkaraṇa* (the inner instrument of mind, intellect, ego, and memory). The one who knows the Self as distinct from this *antaḥkaraṇa* realizes that all desires pertain only to the non-Self (*anātman*). The *Sāṃkhya*-oriented knower thus becomes entirely free of *kāma*.

Karma Yoga as the Preparatory Means to Knowledge

Not everyone is capable of completely relinquishing desire through *Sāṅkhya*-based knowledge alone. Therefore, Bhagavān instructs *karma-yoga* and *samādhi-yoga* to those desiring *mokṣa*, as preparatory means to *jñāna*. This is indicated in the verse:
"yoge tvimāṁ śṛṇu" (BhG 2.39) — "Now hear about this yoga."

Before one can abandon the sense of doership (*kartṛtva*) and enjoyership (*bhoktṛtva*) through Self-knowledge, the first step prescribed is *karma-yoga*. What is *karma-yoga*? Śrī Śaṅkara explains:

> **"***niḥsaṅgatayā dvandvaprahāṇapūrvakam īśvarārādhanārthaṁ karmānuṣṭhānaṁ"*
> — The performance of action as worship of Īśvara, preceded by the renunciation of attachment and the cessation of dualities.

Let us consider each of these qualifying attributes more closely.

What is Attachment (*saṅga*)?

Saṅga means clinging—especially clinging to the notion, "I am the doer of this action." Wherever this idea prevails, *rāga* (attachment) and *dveṣa* (aversion) inevitably follow. For one who acts with ego-identification, karma becomes binding and self-perpetuating, even if one wishes to renounce it.

What are Dualities (*dvandva*)?

Dvandva refers to experiential pairs—pleasure and pain, gain and loss, attachment and aversion. To be free of their torment, karma must be done with an equanimous mind and without longing for specific results.

But is this easily accomplished? Not at all. As soon as one engages in action, the question inevitably arises:
"What result will I get from this?"
Human nature is such that no one acts without some motivation. To illustrate this, consider the following anecdote:

> In a village, a husband would occasionally ask his wife to do certain household tasks. Over time, the wife developed a habit of asking in return, "What will you give me?" Expecting rewards for her work. Frustrated by her persistence, the husband eventually stopped offering anything. In protest, she stopped doing

> any work. The household fell into disarray. One day, the exasperated husband, in a fit of anger, struck her twice. Thereafter, whenever he needed her to work, she would simply ask, “Will you give me my due?”

Though seemingly comical, this story mirrors the common human condition: *“I will act, but only if there is something in it for me.”*

The Role of Desire and Result in Karma

Thus arises a question:
What does the Lord mean when He instructs us to act without desiring results?

It is not wrong to perform good deeds with a desire for results. That is precisely why the *Vedas* prescribe *kāmya-karmas*—actions done for desired ends. Even the daily obligatory duties (*nitya-karmas*), when performed, produce *puṇya* (merit). The *śāstra* states that those who perform their *svakarma* (prescribed duty) according to their *varṇa* attain *svarga* (heaven):

> *"varṇāśramāśca svakarmāṇiṣṭhāḥ pretya karmaphalam anubhūya tataḥ..."*
> (Gautama Dharma Sūtra)

After death, one experiences the fruits of karma in other worlds, and thereafter takes birth in favorable circumstances—good lineage, intellect, longevity, prosperity, and happiness—based on the residual karma.

But for the *mumukṣu* (liberation-seeker), such transient results are not desirable. Just as a merchant ignores the trade of straw when engaged in ship-trade, the *mumukṣu* disregards all lesser gains. They perform *nitya-karmas* not for reward, but as an act of worship to the Supreme.

The *Gītā* teaches:
"yataḥ pravṛttir bhūtānāṁ yena sarvam idaṁ tatam |
svakarmaṇā tam abhyarcya siddhiṁ vindati mānavaḥ" (BhG 18.46)

> “From whom all beings arise, by whom all this is pervaded—by worshiping Him through one’s own duty, a human being attains perfection (*siddhi*).”

This *siddhi* refers to *jñānayogyatā*—fitness for Self-knowledge.

When Karma Becomes Karma Yoga

Thus, when karma is performed with:

- *saṅga-tyāga* — abandonment of attachment
- *dvandva-prahāṇa* — freedom from dualities
- *phalābhisandhi-rahitā* — no craving for fruit
- and *Īśvarārpaṇa-buddhi* — as worship of the Lord

...then karma becomes *karma-yoga*. Such karma no longer binds.

If karma is suffused with *yoga-buddhi*—the attitude of spiritual offering—then, as the Lord promises,

"karmabandhaṁ prahāsyasi" (BhG 2.39)

—"You shall be freed from the bondage of action."

The Timeless Relevance of Karma Yoga

There is no doubt that the *karma* spoken of in the *Bhagavad Gītā* refers to actions prescribed by the *śāstra*. This has already been explained earlier. However, in present times, we have become increasingly distanced from *śāstrīya-karma*s.

Sacrifices such as *agnihotra*, *darśa-pūrṇamāsa*, *cāturmāsya* and the like—once considered universal for all eligible householders—are now barely recognized. The duties enjoined in the *Gītā* for *brāhmaṇas* and others, as well as the *yajña* (sacrifice), *dāna* (charity), and *tapas* (austerity), are followed only in a few isolated places. Even so, **the core principle of *karma-yoga* remains immutable**—it is valid for all people at all times.

Even those engaged solely in secular duties and not performing Vedic rituals must align their minds with the essential spirit of *karma-yoga*. This turning inward toward the right vision of action is crucial.

The Gap Between Preaching and Practice

Today, many eloquently speak the exalted words of *Vedānta*, yet few are prepared to undertake the necessary disciplines. There may be many who desire the honorifics of *sādhu* (holy man) or *saṃnyāsī* (renunciate), but very few who actually possess the requisite virtues—or are even willing to engage in the rigorous discipline required to become worthy of such designations.

Similarly, though numerous people take pride in identifying as *brāhmaṇas*, few genuinely strive to cultivate the inner qualities befitting that name: selflessness (*niṣkāmatā*), commitment to duty (*svadharma-niṣṭhā*), endurance (*titikṣā*), faith in the *śāstra* and in the *guru*, and a healthy fear of wrongdoing (*pāpa-bhaya*).

In the same way, countless individuals may recite and comment on verses of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but *rare are the noble souls who comprehend and sincerely practice the essence of karma-yoga taught therein*.

The Spirit of Renunciation in Action

Indeed, detachment and renunciation of fruits—key features of *karma-yoga*—seem quite difficult for most of us. Yet, for those who have cultivated the habit of dedicating their actions to *Īśvara* (the Lord), this orientation becomes natural and effortless.

Just as one learns to prepare bitter vegetables like *kārelā* (bitter gourd) by removing their bitterness, **one must acquire the subtle art of removing fruit-oriented desire from action**, thus purifying the *karma* and freeing oneself from its bondage.

This skill—*karma-yoga*—is easily developed by treating every action as an offering (*ārādhana*) to the Supreme. It is a far greater act of worship to transform our everyday

actions into divine service than to laboriously gather flowers, fruits, and coconuts for a formal ritual (*Īśvarapūjā*).

Grace and Gratitude in Every Action

All the actions we perform are truly possible only by the grace of the Lord. Our **body, senses, mind, and intellect**—everything we use to perform action—are His gifts (*prasāda*). What room is there for the arrogance of thinking, “This action is mine”?

If we look carefully, we will find the presence of *Īśvara* in every single action. **To see Him in all actions and to dedicate all actions to Him—this is the ultimate aim of *karma-yoga*.**

50. Dhyāna Yoga

(17-9-53)

The Goal of Karma Yoga and the True Meaning of Yoga

Yesterday, I explained the goal toward which *karma-yoga* points. For those who do not yet have *ātmabhāva* (abidance in the inactive *Paramātman*), and who are still filled with the sense of doership (*kartṛtva-buddhi*), both *karma-yoga* and *karma-saṃnyāsa* (renunciation of action) are taught according to the gradation of their mind's maturity (*citta-sthiti*).

Since, in general, *karma-saṃnyāsa* is difficult to practice, *for practitioners, karma-yoga is considered superior.* Bhagavān (the Lord) Himself has affirmed this.

The *Gītā* is renowned as a *yoga-śāstra* (scripture of yoga). However, there is a divergence of opinion about the principal meaning of the word *yoga* as used in the *Gītā*. Some hold that *karma-yoga* alone is the real *yoga* taught in the *Gītā*, while others imagine that *dhyāna-yoga* (yoga of meditation) or *bhakti-yoga* (yoga of devotion) forms the central teaching.

In the opinion of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, the *yoga* spoken of in the *Gītā* is *jñāna-niṣṭhā* (abidance in knowledge), to be attained through *karma-yoga*. In the second and third chapters, this *yoga* is elaborated with great significance, and indeed, *this is the essence of all the Vedas.*

Bhagavān states: "*I taught this imperishable yoga to Vivasvān long ago; Vivasvān taught it to Manu; Manu taught it to Ikṣvāku*" (BG 4.1). Thus, the antiquity and importance of this *yoga* are praised by recounting its lineage. Since the supreme importance of knowledge (*jñāna*) in the *Gītā* has already been shown earlier, there is little need to repeat it here.

The *Gītā* Is Not Merely a Text for Kṣatriyas

Some, adopting a *bhāgavata* (sectarian) interpretation, claim: "*The Gītā is merely a karma-yoga-śāstra taught to kṣatriyas like Ikṣvāku; renunciation was added in later times*." But this view is incorrect.

The *Gītā* is not addressed exclusively to kings; it is stated that it was taught to *rājarṣis* (royal sages). Bhagavān Himself declares: "*evaṃ paramparāprāptam imaṃ rājarṣayo viduḥ*" (BG 4.2) — "*Thus, this was known through succession by the royal sages*."

For *rājaṛṣis*, the aim was *dharma*, not mere kingdom. Kings were charged with upholding and protecting *dharma*. Once, when anarchy prevailed in the world, the people approached Manu, upon Brahmā's command, and requested him to rule according to the *dharma-śāstra*. Initially, Manu hesitated, knowing that it would be impossible to govern hypocritical people without incurring sin. But upon their assurance — "*We will act according to dharma and donate to you a fourth part of our merit*" — Manu agreed.

The Role of Kṣatriyas and the Preservation of Dharma

According to some commentators, "*If rājaṛṣis possess the strength of paramārtha-yoga (realization of the ultimate reality), they can safeguard brāhmaṇya (spiritual knowledge and priesthood); and if both brahma (knowledge) and kṣatra (ruler) are preserved, then the world itself is protected*." Śrī Śaṅkara mentions this in his *Gītā-bhāṣya*.

Thus, although knowledge is everyone's right, *the Lord taught it especially to kṣatriyas to make them fit for the protection of dharma.* Over time, as unrighteousness grew, that *yoga* tradition was lost. To restore it, Bhagavān taught it again to Arjuna.

Just as not everything in a book on political science applies only to kings, similarly, the teachings of the *Gītā* are not confined to kṣatriyas just because Arjuna was one. We must read the entire work, weighing the internal evidence, before forming conclusions.

The Revelation of the Lord's True Nature

After hearing the lineage of the teachers narrated by the Lord, Arjuna raises a doubt: "*Vivasvān (the sun-god) was born at the beginning of creation, but You were born recently. How can I believe that You taught him?*" (BG 4.4)

This doubt is not included in the *Gītā* merely for superficial curiosity. It serves as a pretext to reveal *the Supreme Nature of Bhagavān.*

The Lord is the very *Ātman* (Self) of all beings. Realizing the nature of this Supreme Self is the highest goal for all seekers. Bhagavān explains to Arjuna:

> "*Many births of Mine and yours have passed, O Arjuna. I know them all; you do not know yours.*"
> "*ajo'pi sann avyayātmā bhūtānām īśvaro'pi san prakṛtiṃ svām adhiṣṭhāya sambhavāmy ātma-māyayā*" (BG 4.6)
> "*Although I am unborn and of imperishable nature, although I am the Lord of beings, controlling My own prakṛti, I manifest Myself by My own māyā.*"

Here, the term 'avatāra' (incarnation) does not even appear. The *Gītā* speaks only of the "divine birth" (*divya-janma*). The subsequent elaboration of the concept of *avatāra* developed later and should be investigated by historians, though it is beyond our current topic.

The Lord's Divine Birth and Actions

The Lord declares that He indeed undergoes births. However, these births are born of *māyā*; they are not real (*tattvataḥ*). He does not assume a body like ours, subject to the compulsions of *prakṛti*, nor does He reap the fruits of *karma* through pleasure and pain. Being fully independent (*svatantra*), and keeping His own *vaiṣṇavī prakṛti* under control,

He merely appears to be born, without undergoing suffering. His birth is unlike that of ordinary beings, who cry at birth and die in sorrow.

From the infinite births of the Lord, no taint of the fruits of *puṇya* (virtue) or *pāpa* (sin) attaches to Him. To the one who understands the divine nature of the Lord's birth and actions, the following result is declared:

> *janma karma ca me divyam evaṃ yo vetti tattvataḥ |*
> *tyaktvā dehaṃ punar janma naiti mām eti so'rjuna ||* (BG 4.9)
>
> "Arjuna, he who knows My divine birth and actions in reality, after leaving the body, is not born again; he comes unto Me."

How is it that such a knower does not undergo rebirth? This doubt may arise. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya provides a clear explanation rooted in the nature of the *ātman* itself.

The Self: Beyond Birth and Death

The *ātman* is naturally free from birth and death. The Lord states:

> *na tvevāhaṃ jātu nāsaṃ na tvaṃ neme janādhipāḥ |*
> *na caiva na bhaviṣyāmaḥ sarve vayam ataḥ param ||* (BG 2.12)

Not only the Supreme Self but even the individual selves (*jīvas*) are never truly born or destroyed. "*na jāyate mriyate vā kadāciṭ*" (BG 2.20) — "*It is never born, nor does it ever die.*"

Since the *ātman* is none other than the Lord Himself, the one who knows that his true Self has neither birth nor death becomes liberated (*mokṣa*). Abiding in this knowledge is the supreme *puruṣārtha* (goal of human life).

The *Gītā* thus teaches that *karma-yoga* is a preparatory discipline (*sādhana*) leading to this ultimate *puruṣārtha*.

The Meaning of Yoga in the Bhagavad Gītā

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *jñāna-niṣṭhā* (steadfastness in knowledge) itself is properly called *yoga*.

- *karma-yoga* and *dhyāna-yoga* are means (secondary *yogas*) leading to this end.
- *karma-yoga* is external to knowledge;
- *dhyāna-yoga* is internal to knowledge.

Before elaborating the relationship between *karma-yoga* and *dhyāna-yoga*, it is appropriate to first clarify **why the doctrine taught in the Gītā is called *Bhāgavata Mata*.**

Why the Gītā's Teaching is Called *Bhāgavata Mata*

It has already been shown that the Gītā's subject matter is the supreme reality identified as *Vāsudeva Bhagavān*, following Śrī Śaṅkara's explanation. Though the *Gītā-prasthāna* is

primarily *sādhana-pradhāna* (practice-oriented), it centers on devotion to the Lord (*Bhagavat-pradhāna*) and expounds all *sādhanas* leading to Him.

- *karma-yoga* is performing action without attachment to results, offering it as *archana* (worship) to the Lord.
- *dhyāna-yoga* is meditating upon that same Lord.
- *jñāna* is realizing the Lord as one's own Self.

Therefore, the Gītā's doctrine is rightly termed *Bhāgavata Mata* — the teaching centered on Bhagavān.

It is important to note that:

- In *karma-yoga*, *karma* (action) is predominantly physical.
- In *dhyāna-yoga*, *karma* becomes predominantly mental.

Both are means (*sādhanas*) connected to the realization of Bhagavān.

Preparation for Dhyāna Yoga

Now that *karma-yoga*, which is external and physical, has been explained, the discussion must turn to *dhyāna-yoga*, the internal and mental discipline.

According to Śrī Śaṅkara, Bhagavān summarized the method of *dhyāna-yoga* as follows:

> *sparśān kṛtvā bahir bāhyāṃś cakṣuś caivāntare bhruvoḥ |*
> *prāṇāpānau samau kṛtvā nāsābhyantara-cāriṇau ||*
> *yatendriya-mano-buddhir munir mokṣa-parāyaṇaḥ |*
> *vigatecchā-bhaya-krodho yaḥ sadā mukta eva saḥ ||* (BG 5.27–28)

The instructions are:

- Withdraw the senses from external objects.
- Steadily fix the gaze between the eyebrows without allowing it to wander outward.
- Balance the *prāṇa* and *apāna* by focusing on the breath within the nostrils.
- Restrain the senses, mind, and intellect firmly.
- Abandon desires, fear, and anger — the primary disturbances of the mind.

After thus preparing the mind and body, one should engage in *ātma-dhyāna* (meditation on the Self). Such a person quickly attains *mokṣa* (liberation)

From Karma Yoga to Dhyāna Yoga

A seeker must attain *naiṣkarmya* (actionlessness) by becoming free from desire (*niṣkāmatā*). Ordinarily, the human mind—like a buffalo drinking muddy water—clings stubbornly to action and its results. However, by abandoning attachment (*saṅga*) and desire for fruits (*phalābhisandhi*), and by performing actions with the intellect (*buddhi*) dedicated to God (*Īśvara*), the seeker gradually overcomes desire.

When *karma-yoga* becomes firmly assimilated (*niṣṭhā*), the eligibility (*adhikāritva*) for *dhyāna-yoga* arises. Therefore, the Lord states:

> *ārurukṣor muner yogaṃ karma kāraṇam ucyate |*
> *yogārūḍhasya tasya śamaḥ kāraṇam ucyate ||* (BG 6.3)
>
> "For the sage (*muni*) desiring to ascend to yoga, action (*karma*) is said to be the means; but for one who has ascended to yoga, tranquility (*śama*) is said to be the means."

Transition from Karma to Dhyāna

Thus:

- **Until** the worthiness (*adhikāra*) for ascending to *dhyāna-yoga* arises, action (*karma*) remains the means.
- **Once** worthiness matures, *śama* (tranquility) and the inner qualities born of renunciation (*tyāga*) become the means.

Even though the *dhyāna-yogin* has externally abandoned action, he has not become entirely inactive. Instead of external physical actions, he now performs an internal, mental action — namely, meditation (*dhyāna*).

One may ask: "Does not the *karma-yogin* too practice meditation?"

Yes, he does. But in his case, *dhyāna* is subordinate to action, practiced as a support for the performance of karma. For the *dhyāna-yogin*, however, *dhyāna* itself becomes the primary engagement, and all external actions are set aside.

The Fate of One Who Falls from Dhyāna Yoga

Arjuna, recognizing the difficulty of *dhyāna-yoga*, raises an important doubt:

> "If a yogin falls from *dhyāna-yoga*, does he lose both the fruits of *karma* and the fruits of *dhyāna*? Does he become deprived of both?"

The Lord replies compassionately:

- No. Through the greatness of his previous yoga-practice, the fallen yogin (*yoga-bhraṣṭa*) experiences excellent fruits in the afterlife.

- In a subsequent birth, he is reborn into a favorable environment and, resuming his efforts, quickly attains perfection (*siddhi*).

Thus, no sincere effort in *yoga* is ever wasted.

The Coming Reflection

The nature and characteristics of *dhyāna-yoga* still require deeper contemplation.
This will be taken up tomorrow — for it is a topic deserving of careful and devoted reflection.

51. The unique nature of Dhyana Yoga

(18-9-53)

Karma Yoga and Dhyāna Yoga: Outer and Inner Aids

Although the Self (*Ātman*) is inherently inactive (*niṣkriya*) in its true nature, it has already been explained that *karma-yoga* serves as the **external aid** (*bāhya-sādhana*) to knowledge for aspirants (*mumukṣu*) who still retain the notion of agency (*kartṛtva-buddhi*), while *dhyāna-yoga* serves as the **internal aid** (*āntaraṅga-sādhana*).

It has also been made clear that, in this world, beings are naturally endowed with either *asura-sampatti* (demonic qualities) or *daiva-sampatti* (divine qualities). Further, even one initially possessing *asura-sampatti* may, through the influence of *puṇya-karma* (meritorious deeds), develop *daiva-sampatti*. Those endowed with *daiva-sampatti* are eligible for the pursuit of either *karma-yoga* or *dhyāna-yoga*. Therefore, for such aspirants, the question of whether they must compulsorily perform or renounce actions (*śāstra-vihita-karma*) does not arise.

Until the mind is sufficiently purified (*citta-śuddhi*), these aspirants perform actions with the attitude of dedication to God (*Īśvarārpaṇa-buddhi*). Upon achieving purification, they become eligible for *dhyāna-yoga*.

Signs of Eligibility for Dhyāna Yoga

How does one know that the time for *dhyāna-yoga* has come?

- When a person no longer possesses any craving for sense-pleasures (*indriya-bhoga*)
- When all personal intentions (*sarva-saṅkalpa*) are entirely abandoned
- When the mind no longer seeks the satisfaction of the senses (*indriya-tṛpti*)

Such a person is ready to ascend to *dhyāna-yoga*.

Analogy of the Flowing River:
Just as the water of the Ganges continues to flow and change while the river is still called "Ganga," similarly, though the senses and objects change, the deluded ego (*ahaṅkāra*) persists, thinking "I, I". Therefore, that which appears pleasurable at one time appears painful at another. A discerning aspirant (*vivekī*) does not depend on the fickle pleasures of the senses (*indriyārtha*), recognizing their impermanence, and instead strives for the bliss of the Self (*Ānanda-Ātman*) within.

Such a one becomes fit for *dhyāna-yoga*.

Misconceptions about Dhyāna Yoga

Today, many talk about *dhyāna-yoga* without actually practicing it.
It is akin to gossipy fools proclaiming, "The President spoke some secret words!"
Similarly, many elaborate on the secrets of *dhyāna-yoga* without any real inwardness.

Some even absurdly explain that when yogins become introverted, they somehow physically twist their faces!
Let us instead heed what the *Bhagavad Gītā* actually teaches:

> *śanaiḥ śanair uparamed buddhyā dhṛti-gṛhītayā |*
> *ātma-saṃsthaṃ manaḥ kṛtvā na kiñcid api cintayet ||* (BG 6.25)
>
> "With the intellect firmly held in resolution, one should slowly withdraw the mind; having fixed the mind in the Self, one should think of nothing else."

The Method of Merging

Thus, the seeker must:

- Gradually withdraw the senses into the mind
- Merge the mind into the intellect (*buddhi*)
- Merge the intellect into the ego (*ahaṅkāra*)
- Ultimately dissolve everything into the pure Self

Meaning of Merging:
Suppose one fixes attention on an idol made of nectar-stone (*amṛta-śilā*). By contemplating its substratum, the idol resolves into the stone. Similarly, contemplating that there are no independent senses apart from the mind leads to merging the gross elements into the subtler principle (*sattattva*).

This process of merging the external into the internal is called *adhyātma-yoga* in the Upaniṣads.

The ultimate culmination of *dhyāna-yoga* is thus: **Everything dissolves into the Self.**

The Self-Abiding Mind

What does it mean for the mind to become Self-abiding (*ātmasaṃsthita-citta*)?

- Through the teachings of *śāstra* and the instructions of the *ācārya*, one realizes that everything is the Self (*sarvaṃ ātma*).

- One recognizes that there is no mind, no senses, no objects separate from the Self.

This "becoming mindless of the mind" (*manonāśa*) is what *Gauḍapāda Ācārya* has described in his profound works.

Distinguishing *Dhyāna Yoga* from Patañjali Yoga

There is a significant distinction between the *Dhyāna Yoga* described in the Bhagavad Gītā and the system of Yoga taught by Patañjali. Many, failing to recognize this difference, mistakenly assume that the sixth chapter of the Gītā presents Patañjali's Yoga.

What is the core of Patañjali Yoga? It is the restraint of the modifications of the mind (*citta-vṛtti-nirodha*). The mind naturally undergoes various types of modifications, and the aim of Yoga, as defined by Patañjali, is to prevent these modifications by cultivating *ekāgra-vṛtti* (one-pointed concentration), supported by *abhyāsa* (persistent practice) and *vairāgya* (detachment), and through disciplines like *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, and *samādhi*. When one retains awareness—"I am not experiencing any mental modifications now"—this is termed *samprajñāta-samādhi*. When even this awareness dissolves, it is called *asamprajñāta-samādhi*. However, even then, latent impressions (*saṁskāras*) persist in the mind. By attaining *samādhi*, the aspirant comes to discern the distinction between *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*, which is considered the ultimate goal in Patañjali Yoga.

Like Sāṅkhya, Yoga Darśana accepts *pradhāna* (primordial matter) and other ontological categories. According to Yogic doctrine, the mind never fully dissolves; thus, Yoga is fundamentally a dualistic philosophy. Bondage (*bandha*) arises from non-discrimination between *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*, and liberation (*mokṣa*) is achieved through the clear discernment between the two. The Yogins say: "We explain Yoga so that this discrimination may be directly experienced."

The Distinct Aim of *Adhyātma Yoga*

However, the *Adhyātma Yoga* of Vedānta is of a wholly different nature. The Gītā instructs:
Ātmasaṁsthaṁ manaḥ kṛtvā na kiñcid api cintayet—
"Fixing the mind in the Self, one should not think of anything else."

Here, the process is one of **merging**: the senses are to be absorbed into the mind, and the mind into the Self. Just as cloth, when analyzed, is reduced to thread, and thread in turn to cotton—revealing that the effect is not separate from its cause—similarly, the aspirant must observe the mind with subtle discernment until it is clearly understood that the mind is not distinct from the Self. This is *subtle observation* (*sūkṣma-parīkṣaṇa*).

Just as a gem expert examines a jewel with a keen and subtle eye, the *Dhyāna Yogin* attentively discerns that the mind and all else are fundamentally none other than the Self. Such *sūkṣma-dṛṣṭi* (subtle vision) is possible only when one's senses, mind, and intellect are pure. For one who has attained steadfast focus (*sthira-citta*), even external suffering cannot disturb the mind's absorption into the Self. This is the *mind-control* spoken of by Gauḍapāda Ācārya.

The fruit of this Yoga is **the vision of Brahman everywhere**—seeing no difference or superiority between Brahman and one's own Self. The realization dawns that the Self is Brahman, and this Brahman is the Self of all beings. When this vision arises, as described in the Gītā (6.29–30), one has truly attained the fruit of *Dhyāna Yoga*.

Upāsanā and *Dhyāna Yoga*: A Key Distinction

In the eighth chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā, *upāsanā* (meditative worship) is described, which the Ācāryas refer to as *Dhāraṇā Yoga*. Texts like the *Praśna Upaniṣad* explain the meditative path involving contemplation on *Omkāra* (the sacred syllable Om) as a symbol of the *Paramātman* (Supreme Self).

What is a key difference between *upāsanā* and *Dhyāna Yoga*? *Upāsanā* involves **imaginative meditation** (*bhāvanā*), whereby the aspirant deliberately visualizes according to scriptural instructions. *Dhyāna Yoga*, by contrast, is **direct seeing**—discerning things as they truly are with subtle insight.

To illustrate: the *Śruti* declares, *Mātṛdevo bhava*—"Regard your mother as God." Understanding one's mother as mother is factual; thinking of her as God is a scriptural instruction that requires *bhāvanā* (intentional imagination).

The equipment and method for *Dhāraṇā Yoga*, as described in the eighth chapter, are as follows:

> *Sarva-dvārāṇi saṁyamya mano hṛdi nirudhya ca |*
> *Mūrdhny-ādhāyātmanaḥ prāṇam āsthito yoga-dhāraṇām ||*
> *Omity ekākṣaraṁ brahma vyāharan māṁ anusmaran |*
> *Yaḥ prayāti tyajan dehaṁ sa yāti paramāṁ gatim ||*

"Having restrained all the sense gates, confining the mind in the heart, and fixing the life-breath at the crown of the head, one devoted to Yoga-concentration utters the single syllable Om—Brahman—and remembering Me, departs, casting off the body, to attain the supreme goal."

Having firmly controlled all the sense gates, the mind should be steadfastly held in the heart, without allowing any mental modifications (*vṛttis*) to arise. Once the mind is thus mastered, one's vital energy (*prāṇa-śakti*) should be directed upward, through the *suṣumṇā-nāḍī*, and established at the point above the middle of the forehead (*nāḍu-neṭṭiya mele*). Similar to what is described in Patañjali's Yoga, focusing the mind on a fixed point and meditating upon it is here referred to as *dhāraṇā*.

Chanting the name of the *Paramātman*, symbolized by *Omkāra* (AUM), one should continuously remember *Parameśvara* (the Supreme Lord), who is its essential meaning. Through *upāsanā* performed in this manner—culminating in the realization of *Īśvara*—the aspirant, at the time of leaving the body, ascends via the *arcirādi-mārga* (the path of light), which is described in the verse: *"agnir jyotir ahaḥ śuklaḥ..."* (Gītā 8.24). Thus, he attains the Supreme Self and achieves *krama-mukti* (gradual liberation). This describes the path of *upāsanā* as set forth in the Gītā.

In contrast, the *dhyāna yoga* described in the sixth chapter leads to *sadyo-mukti* (immediate liberation) here and now. It involves an inner vision of subtle perception,

wherein all external sensory activities are merged into the mind, and that mind, in turn, is merged into the Self—this is not mere conceptualization but direct experience.

Consider ordinary perception: objects appear one way to those who glance at them casually, but to those who observe intently—whether without blinking, using instruments like binoculars, or through scientific experiments—the same objects reveal new and deeper properties. Many of the discoveries in modern physics have arisen from such attentive observation. Likewise, just as physicists employ subtle observation to uncover hidden aspects of external phenomena, spiritual yogins use a purified and refined mind to inwardly perceive the *ātma-tattva* (the principle of the Self).

When seen through such subtle, discriminative vision, it becomes clear that the one Supreme Self alone exists in all beings, and that no action of the elements (*bhūtas*) occurs independently of this Self. This Self-knowledge arises as direct, immediate experience (*anubhava*). Since the yogin thus attains the knowledge of the essential oneness of Brahman and the Self (*brahmātmaikyatva-jñāna*) within this very lifetime, he need not await liberation after death—liberation (*mokṣa*) manifests directly and immediately.

52. Bhakti Yoga (The Yoga of Devotion)

(21-9-53)

Due to physical discomfort over the past two days, two lectures were missed. Moreover, given the limited time available for the Gītā lectures—and since detailed talks under the title *"Lectures on the Gītā"* have already been published by the Adhyātma Prakāśa Kāryālaya—this discussion of the *prasthāna* (canonical text) will be kept brief.

I have mentioned before that I intended to cover it, but in truth, it seems almost unnecessary to explain the Gītā—because in this field, there are far more people eager to *speak* about the Gītā than there are willing to *listen* attentively.

As I have already stated, the Bhagavad Gītā primarily elaborates on the principles laid down in the Vedānta—that is, the Upaniṣads—and expounds the *sādhanas* (spiritual disciplines) that arise from them. What makes this *prasthāna* particularly significant is its emphasis on revealing the inner intent behind Vedic rituals, presenting these teachings in a way that applies universally to all people.

The Gītā speaks unmistakably of *śāstrīya karma* (scripturally enjoined action). But with its emphasis on God, the Gītā teaches that if one performs *śāstroktakarma* (action as prescribed by scripture) while remembering God—signified by the sacred utterance *Om Tat Sat*—that action is imbued with purity and goodness. Even worldly actions, when offered in worship of God and accompanied by remembrance of His name, yield the fruits of Karma Yoga—this is the clear guidance we receive. Extending the meaning of phrases such as *yat karoṣi yad aśnāsi* ("Whatever you do, whatever you eat..."), we are taught to consecrate all our actions to God. One should work wholeheartedly; one should not abandon action due to physical difficulty. One should perform *sāttvika karma* (pure, selfless action) and should not forsake one's *svakarma* (duty) even if it appears flawed. By thoughtfully selecting such wise sayings from the Gītā, a discerning person can skillfully

adapt to present circumstances. The main principle is that while fully engaging in worldly transactions, one should dedicate their heart and effort to the worship of God. This is the essence of Karma Yoga.

Karma Yoga is external, concerned with the body; Dhyāna Yoga is internal, concerned with the mind. However, many who are hesitant or unwilling to engage in karma often escape under the pretense that “mental feeling is the real essence,” and thus avoid bodily engagement. They may say, “I have taken a mental bath—what need is there for a physical one?” But one must understand that such laziness indicates a lack of proper qualification for true mental practice. We might well respond: “If you have taken a mental bath, then why not also take a mental meal?”—and see how their faces change at that suggestion!

Indeed, truly great souls, deeply absorbed in mental yoga, have no interest in external sensory actions; they are genuinely oblivious to outer awareness. Some of you may have heard the story of *Sadāśiva Brahmendra*, a king among yogins. The earth was his bed, and the sky his covering—his mind ever immersed in contemplation of the Supreme Self. It is said that even such realized souls were attentive to well-reasoned words spoken by worldly people.

A story is told in this regard: *Sadāśiva Brahmendra*, clad only in a loincloth, was lying by the side of a field, resting his head directly on the ground. Some passersby remarked, “Ah! How strange—it seems that even these ascetics who have renounced everything still feel the need for a pillow!” and they moved on. When they returned that way later, they saw that the great soul had shifted his head slightly. Yet again, these idle critics said mockingly, “What is this? We were only joking earlier! Why should our words matter to someone who has given up all outward attachments?” But this time, *Sadāśiva* remained silent, recognizing that there was nothing in their words worth responding to.

The Role of Discrimination and Detachment

Only one who possesses intense detachment (*vairāgya*) and practices discrimination (*viveka-abhyāsa*) gains ease in internal meditation. Such a person attains knowledge of *Vāsudeva-tattva* as taught in the Gītā. To those who ask, "How can we attain Self-realization?" the Gītā responds: practice according to your own mental disposition.

> *dhyānenātmani paśyanti kecid ātmānam ātmanā |*
> *anye sāṃkhyena yogena karmayogena cāpare ||*
> *anye tv evam ajānantaḥ śrutvānyebhya upāsate |*
> *te 'pi cātitaranty eva mṛtyuṃ śruti-parāyaṇāḥ ||* (Gītā 13.24–25)

(Some perceive the Self within the self by meditation, others through the yoga of knowledge, still others through karma yoga. Others, not knowing thus, worship after hearing from others. Even these, devoted to hearing, transcend death.)

Whichever path—meditation, *Sāṅkhya*, or *karma yoga*—is suited to one's nature, that should be pursued; eventually, it will lead to *tattva-jñāna* (realization of Truth). For those unable to follow any of these paths, the instruction is to practice with faith under the guidance of others. Even they, through faithful and devoted practice, will cross the ocean of *saṃsāra* (birth and death). Whatever *sādhana* (spiritual discipline) one follows, it is essential that it be performed selflessly (*niṣkāma*). This is, however, difficult for most people.

The Problem of Selfishness and Narrow Vision

In practice, *yajñas* (sacrifices), *dānas* (charities), and *tapas* (penances) are often performed with ulterior motives (*sākāma*). It is said that a foolish man, upon learning that another ascetic had asked for a boon twice as good as the one granted to him, angrily demanded, "Then let one of my eyes be taken away!" Such is the narrow vision of the worldly. For these, the teaching of *sarvatra samadarśanaḥ* ("seeing the same everywhere") remains forever out of reach.

> *tribhir guṇamayair bhāvair ebhiḥ sarvam idaṃ jagat |*
> *mohitam nābhijānāti mām ebhyaḥ param avyayam ||*
> *daivī hy eṣā guṇamayī mama māyā duratyayā |*
> *mām eva ye prapadyante māyām etāṃ taranti te ||*

(All beings in this world are deluded by the modes of nature and fail to recognize Me, who am beyond them. This divine māyā of Mine, made of the three guṇas, is difficult to cross; but those who take refuge in Me alone cross over this māyā.)

Taking Refuge in the Lord: The Essence of Sādhana

Those deluded by attachment, aversion, and infatuation—rooted in *rajas* and *tamas*—cannot grasp the essence of Vāsudeva Bhagavān, who transcends all attributes. The Lord Himself assures that while His *māyā* is difficult to overcome, those who renounce all *dharmas* (duties) and surrender fully to Him as their own Self do cross beyond it. Hence, the core of all *sādhana* lies in taking refuge in the Lord.

The Bhakti Mārga and Its Challenges

The path of worshiping the Lord alone is called *bhakti mārga* (the path of devotion). This path does not appeal to the worldly-minded, whose intellect has been clouded by *pāpa* (sin) and *māyā*, stealing away their capacity for discernment (*viveka*). Such people are ensnared by the demonic impulses of "I" and "mine." Only those who are *sāttvika* (pure) and have accumulated merit (*puṇya*) are fit for this path of devotion.

Even among devotees, motivations differ, and thus the Lord classifies devotees into four types:

1. **Ārta (The Distressed):** One afflicted by fears—of thieves, wild animals, diseases, or any kind of *adhyātmika* (spiritual), *ādhibhautika* (material), or *ādhidaivika* (divine) suffering. Such a person turns to the Lord for relief. Although everyone in the world is subject to *tāpatraya* (the threefold suffering), most seek relief through worldly means. The *ārta-bhaktas*, however, believe firmly that only the Lord can truly relieve their distress.

2. **Arthārthī (The Seeker of Wealth):** One who desires worldly wealth—house, money, power, knowledge, fame. Most pursue these goals through material means, often without scruples. But the *arthārthī-bhakta* seeks wealth earned righteously through the grace of the Lord, recognizing Him as the source of all prosperity.

3. **Jijñāsu (The Inquisitive Seeker):** One who longs to understand the true nature of the Lord (*Bhagavat-tattva*), regardless of worldly gains or losses. Such a devotee prays: “O Lord, whether You grant or withhold worldly things as per my karma is Your

will—but whatever happens, may I never forget You. Please reveal Your true nature to me and bless me." This type of devotee, marked by *vairāgya* and steadfastness, progresses more quickly than the others.

4. **Jñānī (The Knower):** Though not explicitly detailed here, Śrī Kṛṣṇa elsewhere praises the *jñānī* as the highest devotee, one who knows and abides in the truth of the Self.

The Role of Vibhūti Yoga for Devotees

It has been said that *māyā* obstructs the worship of the Lord; however, this *māyā* does not hinder true devotees, for their entire effort is directed toward the worship of the Lord Himself. Moreover, they have heard and absorbed the invaluable teaching: *"Vāsudevaḥ sarvam iti"*—"Vāsudeva is all." As a result, their chances of being overwhelmed by sorrow and suffering brought about by the qualities (*guṇas*) in the form of *māyā* are greatly diminished.

For such devoted individuals, the *Vibhūti Yoga* described in the tenth chapter of the Gītā serves as a powerful aid. The Lord's glories (*vibhūtis*) are visible everywhere in this world. As declared in the Gītā: among the *Ādityas* (solar deities), the Lord is Viṣṇu; among luminaries, He is the Sun; among stars, He is the Moon; among trees, He is the Aśvattha (sacred fig); among letters, He is the letter 'A'; victory and enterprise are also His manifestations. Those who recognize and behold the Lord's glory in these ways accrue immense merit.

In truth, the entire universe is the grand manifestation of the Lord's glory. By merely seeing, touching, and conversing with such great devotees who are steadfast in their vision of the Lord's greatness, even others are gradually drawn toward the path of unwavering devotion (*niṣṭhā-bhakti*).

Those who immerse themselves in contemplating the Lord's glories in this way are able, through *nididhyāsana* (deep, repeated contemplation), to very easily grasp the true nature of the Lord. Once this understanding is firmly established, they develop supreme and unshakable devotion (*parā-bhakti*) toward Him.

53. Gita Prasthana Conclusion

(22-9-53)

Today, we bring our discussion of the Gītā *prasthāna* to a close. Since the Lord imparted His beneficial advice to Arjuna in a melodious, verse-like manner, it came to be known as the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Yet, because the Lord Himself is the very essence and subject of this teaching, it is even more fitting to call it *Bhagavad Gītā*, keeping in mind what has already been discussed.

Two Principal Dharmas: Pravṛtti and Nivṛtti

In the Bhagavad Gītā, two primary *dharmas* are taught: *pravṛtti dharma* (the path of action) and *nivṛtti dharma* (the path of renunciation). *Pravṛtti dharma* is taught as *karma yoga*: for

mumukṣus (those earnestly seeking liberation) who transform action into yoga by offering all deeds selflessly for the pleasure of the Lord. To such aspirants, *dhyāna yoga* (the yoga of meditation) is then prescribed as a next stage.

The text links *dhyāna yoga* with *Pātañjala Yoga*, elaborating on different stages of yogic practice—this, too, is seen as a stepping-stone toward deepening one's devotion to the Lord.

The Distinct Nature of Yoga in the Gītā

Because *Pātañjala Yoga* lends its name to the broader concept of yoga, many mistakenly assume that the yoga described in the sixth chapter of the Gītā is simply Patañjali's system. However, this is not so. True yoga, as taught in the Gītā, culminates in Self-knowledge—attainable only through Vedāntic disciplines such as *śravaṇa* (listening), *manana* (reflection), and *nididhyāsana* (deep meditation). The main obstacle to success in these disciplines is *kāma* (desire).

What Constitutes True Śravaṇa?

But what truly is *śravaṇa*? It is not the casual hearing of Vedāntic teachings—as, for example, when sound from a loudspeaker reaches the ears of passersby. Mere exposure to the words does not amount to *śravaṇa*. Rather, it involves a qualified seeker who listens attentively, with deep understanding. The presence of egoism—*ahaṃ mama* ("I" and "mine")—inevitably gives rise to *kāma*, which distracts the mind. By contrast, those who direct their mind steadily toward the Lord are called *bhāgavatas*—individuals in whom the idea of *na mama* ("not mine") is firmly ingrained.

Cultivating Eligibility Through Karma Yoga

Practices such as *dāna* (charity), when performed with the spirit of *na mama*, especially when consciously offered to Īśvara (*Īśvarārpaṇa buddhi*), gradually foster this worthiness. *Yajña* (sacrifice), *dāna*, and *tapas* (austerity) become *karma yoga* only when they are performed as offerings to the Lord. Mastery of this *karma yoga* prepares one for *dhyāna yoga*, as the famous verse explains:
'ārurukṣor muner yogaṃ karma kāraṇam ucyate'—for the sage who seeks to ascend into yoga, action is declared the means.

The Essential Role of Bhagavad Bhāvana

Attaining *dhyāna yoga* is impossible without *Bhagavad bhāvana*—the cultivation of deep feeling for the Lord. The Bhagavad Gītā emphasizes:
"yoginām api sarveṣāṃ madgatenāntarātmanā | śraddhāvān bhajate yo māṃ sa me yuktatamo mataḥ ||"
Among all yogis, the one who, full of faith, worships Me with a mind absorbed in Me is considered by Me to be the most perfectly united in yoga.

Vibhūti Upāsanā: Meditating on the Lord's Glories

Vibhūti upāsanā—worship through meditating on the Lord's divine manifestations—nurtures *Bhagavad bhāvana*. Initially, the Lord highlights *sāttvika* (pure and luminous) objects as His *vibhūtis* (glories). Gradually, He reveals that all objects, made of the three *guṇas*, are likewise His manifestations. Finally, He declares that the

entire universe is but a fraction of His *vibhūti*. This teaching instills the profound vision that the Lord pervades everything—above, below, within, and without.

Culmination in the Vision of the Lord

Following the teaching on *vibhūtis*—the Lord's manifestations—and the declaration that the entire universe is His glory, the Lord, at Arjuna's request, revealed His *Viśvarūpa* (Universal Form) to intensify Arjuna's understanding. What follows this awe-inspiring vision is the Lord's direct guidance:

> *matkarmakṛn matparamo madbhaktaḥ saṅgavarjitaḥ |*
> *nirvairaḥ sarvabhūteṣu yaḥ sa mām eti pāṇḍava* (BG 11.55)

"He who performs actions for Me, considers Me the supreme goal, is devoted to Me, free of attachment, and without enmity toward any being—he attains Me, O Arjuna."

Śaṅkara's Hermeneutical Precision

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya urges seekers to discern the central purport (*tātparya*) of the Lord's teaching by studying his commentary on this verse carefully. He writes:

> *adhunā sarvasya gītāśāstrasya sārabhūto'rtho niḥśreyasārthaṃ anuṣṭheyena samuccito'cyate*

"Now is stated the essence of the entire Gītā-śāstra, compiled for the sake of the highest good, through that which is to be practiced."

Toward the close of the *Gītopadeśa*, the Lord Himself reiterates that this teaching is both the most secret and the most beneficial. While the *Ācāryas* emphasized that Advaita (non-duality) is the essential purport of the Gītā, they nonetheless acknowledge that dualistic devotion (*bhakta-dvaita*) characterizes the Gītā's practical path. They explain this apparent paradox as follows:

> *yasmāc cārjunasya atyantam eva hitaiṣī bhagavān, tasya samyagdarśanānāgataṃ karmayogaṃ bhedadṛṣṭimanam eva upadiśati*

"Because the Lord, deeply concerned with Arjuna's well-being, speaks to him about *karmayoga* from the standpoint of dualistic perception, which is antecedent to true realization."

From Karma Yoga to Samyagdarśana

Supreme Self-knowledge (*samyagdarśana*), the experience of perceiving oneness in all beings, is not universally accessible. For those not yet qualified, the Gītā offers a clear path: surrender to the Lord. In examining the renowned verse *sarvadharmān parityajya māṃ ekaṃ śaraṇaṃ vraja*, the *Ācāryas* provide the following introductory gloss:

> *karmayoganiṣṭhāyāḥ paramarahasyaṃ īśvaraśaraṇatām upasaṃhṛtya, athedānīṃ karmayoganiṣṭhāphalaṃ samyagdarśanaṃ sarvavedāntāvahita-sāraṃ vaktavyam ityāha—sarvadharmān parityajya…*

“Having concluded that the supreme secret of *karmayoga* is surrender to the Lord, now the fruit of that *karmayoga*—right knowledge (*samyagdarśana*), which is the essence drawn from all Vedānta—is to be taught, and hence He declares: ‘Abandon all duties and take refuge in Me alone.’”

The Supreme Bhakta: The Jñānī

Those whose minds have been purified through *karmayoga* naturally arrive at *jñānaniṣṭhā* (abidance in knowledge), without seeking extraneous goals. Such individuals are the highest kind of *bhakta*—true devotees. The Gītā distinguishes four types of devotees: the distressed (*ārtaḥ*), the seeker of prosperity (*arthārthī*), the inquirer (*jijñāsuḥ*), and the knower (*jñānī*). Of these, the *jñānī* is declared the highest:

> *teṣāṃ jñānī nityayukta ekabhaktir viśiṣyate |*
> *priyo hi jñānino 'tyartham ahaṃ sa ca mama priyaḥ ||*
>
> *udārāḥ sarva evaite jñānī tv ātmaiva me matam |*

“Among them, the one endowed with knowledge, ever united and single-minded in devotion, excels. For I am exceedingly dear to the wise, and he too is dear to Me. Noble indeed are all of them, but the *jñānī* is My very Self in My view.”

Thus, the Gītā leaves no ambiguity that its culmination lies either in steadfast meditation (*dhyānaniṣṭhā*) or in Self-knowledge (*jñāna*), especially for those who truly heed the Lord’s final words.

The Culmination of Knowledge: Jñānaniṣṭhā

The attainment of jñānaniṣṭhā—steadfast abidance in Self-knowledge—marks the true culmination of spiritual inquiry. Strictly speaking, there is no need to “acquire” Self-knowledge as though it were an object to be obtained anew. The Lord, who is the innermost Self of all beings, has already declared in verses such as “*ahamātmā guḍākeśa*” (I am the Self, O Arjuna) and “*kṣetrajñaṃ cāpi māṃ viddhi*” (Know Me as the knower of the field), affirming that the Self is ever-present and ever-realized in its own nature.

The Puzzle of Knowing the Self

In this context, what then does it mean to “know” the Self through meditation or study? The Self is not an object apart from the knower. Knowledge, by its very nature, operates within the subject-object duality, taking on the form of the object it illuminates. Thus arises the profound challenge: how can the Self—non-objectifiable and all-pervading—be grasped by the intellect?

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya clarifies this subtlety with precise reasoning:

> “The Self, on account of its extreme purity, transparency, and subtlety, is not easily grasped by the intellect. Only when the intellect becomes refined and purified to the utmost can it reflect the radiance of the Self’s consciousness.”

This is encapsulated in the Bhāṣya's statement:

> "*ścāssatmasamanairmalyādyupapattērātmacaitanyakārabhāsattōpapattiḥ*"

In other words, the reflection of Self-consciousness in the intellect—though conventionally termed "Self-knowledge"—is but a mirror-like manifestation, mistakenly taken by the ignorant as the true Self.

Negating Superimpositions, Not an attainment

Śaṅkara asserts with precision:

> "*tasmād avidyādhyāropaṇa-nirākaraṇamātraṃ brahmaṇi kartavyam, na tu brahmavijñāne yatnaḥ; atyana prasiddhatvāt"*
>
> (Therefore, with respect to Brahman, only the negation of the superimpositions born of ignorance must be undertaken—not any special effort for knowledge of Brahman itself, as Brahman is already supremely self-evident.)

To those whose intellects remain entangled in the manifold projections of nāma-rūpa (name and form), even the most proximate and self-revealing reality—their own Self—appears unfamiliar, remote, and difficult to apprehend. Conversely, for those whose minds have turned inward, away from external objects, and who have been graced by both the guru and the Lord, nothing is more immediate, joyous, and unmistakably clear than the Self.

As the Gītā echoes in the Bhāṣya (18.50):

> "*pratyakṣāvagamaṃ dharmyam" (directly perceived, virtuous…)*

The absurdity of questioning existence of Self

This leads to a fundamental realization: true effort lies solely in negating the false—what ignorance has superimposed upon the Self. There is no requirement to "gain" Self-knowledge anew, for Brahman is the very essence of our being, eternally present and fully known in its own nature.

Indeed, what greater absurdity can there be than questioning the existence of the Supreme Self, who is none other than our own inmost Self?

A poetic expression of this truth is found in a devotee's heartfelt plea:

> "Do not trouble the senses; I shall worship the beloved Rāma in stillness."

And a jñānī—a realized sage—asserts with unshakable clarity:

> "O senses, I seek no aid from you. I shall remain steadfast in the Supreme Self, my own essential nature. Be silent and abide in peace."

Such a knower continuously affirms his inseparable identity with the Supreme Self, resting effortlessly in the bliss of Self-realization.

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How glorious indeed is the Lord, and what His true nature is—this can be truly realized only by the wise devotee who, through unwavering devotion (bhakti), comes to know Him as the Supreme Self and merges into that very Self at the instant of true knowledge (Gītā 18.55).

At the outset of His instruction to Arjuna, the Lord introduces two modes of devotion:

- Devotion through wisdom (jñāna-bhakti)
- Devotion through action (karma-bhakti)

Some may raise doubts regarding the placement and role of dhyāna (meditation) in the middle of the discourse. However, this is best understood as a refinement or subdivision within karma-yoga itself. By performing actions with the clear understanding that they are offerings to the Divine, the mind becomes purified (chitta-śuddhi). This prepares the seeker to gradually renounce all actions mentally and engage in śravaṇa (listening), manana (reflection), and nididhyāsana (meditative absorption), leading to the dawn of Self-knowledge. Through steadfast establishment in that knowledge, the aspirant attains final fulfillment (niḥśreyasa). Thus, when interpreted through the lens of Vedānta, the Gītā's message remains fully harmonious and integral.

At its heart, the Bhagavad Gītā teaches that one must become a true devotee of the Lord—releasing all external attachments and living with inner renunciation (tyāga), even while engaging in the world.

As the Lord declares:

tēṣāṁ satata-yuktānāṁ bhajatāṁ prīti-pūrvakam |

dadāmi buddhi-yogaṁ taṁ yena mām upayānti te ||

tēṣām evānukampārtham aham ajñāna-jaṁ tamaḥ |

nāśayāmy ātma-bhāva-stho jñāna-dīpena bhāsvatā || (Gītā 10.10–11)

To those ever steadfast and worshipping Me with love, I grant the yoga of discrimination by which they come to Me. Out of sheer compassion for them, abiding as their own Self, I destroy the darkness born of ignorance with the radiant lamp of knowledge.

***

The Lamp of Knowledge: The Acharyas' Vision

The Lord Himself declares unequivocally: only those who, forsaking all else, dedicate themselves wholly to worshipping Him attain union with Him. Out of sheer compassion, the Lord—residing within their very hearts—dispels the darkness of ignorance by kindling the radiant lamp of knowledge.

To bring these discourses on the Gītā to a close, let me elaborate on how the Āchāryas describe this lamp of knowledge in their profound commentaries:

*“viveka-pratyaya-rūpeṇa bhakti-prasāda-sneha-abhiṣiktena
mad-bhāvanā-abhiniveśa-vātēritena brahmacarya-ādi-sādhana-saṁskāra-vat
prajñā-vartinā virakta-antaḥkaraṇa-ādhāreṇa
viṣaya-vyāvṛtta-citta-rāga-dveṣa-akaluṣita-nivāta-āpavara-kathena
nitya-pravṛtta-ekāgra-dhyāna-janita-samyag-darśana-bhāsvatā jñāna-dīpena ity arthaḥ ||”

Translation and Exposition:

This lamp of knowledge (jñāna-dīpa)—

- Takes the form of discriminative conviction (viveka-pratyaya-rūpa),
- Is anointed with the oil of devotion’s grace (bhakti-prasāda-sneha),
- Is fanned into brilliance by the breeze of single-pointed absorption in contemplation of the Lord (mad-bhāvanā-abhiniveśa-vāta),
- Is sustained by wisdom refined through disciplines such as brahmacarya (celibacy, scriptural study, austerity, etc.),
- Is grounded in a mind purified by dispassion (virakta-antaḥkaraṇa),
- Is sheltered within the lamp-cover of a mind withdrawn from sense objects, untouched by the pollution of attachment and aversion (viṣaya-vyāvṛtta-citta-rāga-dveṣa-akaluṣita-nivāta-āpavara),
- And shines resplendently with the perfect vision born of ceaseless, one-pointed meditation (nitya-pravṛtta-ekāgra-dhyāna-janita-samyag-darśana).

In sum, this lamp should be firmly set upon the stand of brahmacarya and allied disciplines, protected within the windless sanctuary of the heart—where the mind, free from worldly cravings, is unshaken by attachment and aversion. It burns steadily and unwaveringly, illumined by true vision arising from uninterrupted meditation.

May we all nurture unwavering devotion to that Supreme Lord!

May His compassion pour forth upon us!

May His boundless grace empower us to persevere in meditation and allied disciplines—

And may this lamp of knowledge forever burn, radiant and unflickering, in the sanctum of our hearts.

Concluding the Series: The Universally Accepted Teachings of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya

(23-9-53)

For nearly two months now, I have been presenting discourses under the title “The Universally Accepted Teachings of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya.” Today marks the conclusion of this series.

The teachings of Śrī Śaṅkarabhagavatpāda are not the product of personal imagination or innovation. They are firmly rooted in the Prasthānatraya—the Upaniṣads, the Gītābhāṣya, and the Brahmasūtra. Although many commentators have based their doctrines on these same foundational texts, Śaṅkarācārya’s exposition holds a unique place. His method faithfully follows the Upaniṣadic approach of encompassing the full range of experience—waking, dreaming, and deep sleep—to demonstrate the existence of the one Supreme Lord as the innermost Self in all beings. This Self is the immutable witness of all states of experience, validated by universal, immediate awareness. It is precisely this universality and immediacy that render the Āchārya’s teachings timeless and accessible to all.

The Ultimate Goal of Life

Recognizing the Paramātman within us must be the supreme aim of human life. No mantra, tantra, penance, or miraculous power can unveil this reality on their own. According to Vedānta, direct realization alone confers true fulfillment. Once realized, liberation (mokṣa) is attained here and now, and life’s ultimate purpose is fulfilled. Without this realization, we remain bound in the relentless cycle of birth and death. Birth, death, heaven, hell, creation, and destruction continue in endless succession, perpetuating worldly sorrow. But by following the Vedāntic path, we can turn inward and discover within ourselves the eternal, pure, conscious, and liberated Paramātman, transforming this very world into a realm of bliss.

The Nature of Perception and Bondage

Just as objects appear in different colors when viewed through various mirrors, so too, as long as we perceive the world through the senses, it manifests as sound, touch, and form. This sensory engagement leads us into attachments and aversions, propelling us into the cycle of desire, action, and fleeting results—binding us repeatedly to worldly existence. The wise must choose means that yield enduring results. Foremost among these is the pursuit of Vedāntic knowledge, which alone leads to the eternal and supreme goal. One should study Śaṅkarācārya’s commentaries, grasp their essence, undertake the necessary spiritual disciplines (sādhanā), and thus realize true fulfillment.

Sanskrit and the Preservation of Spiritual Culture

Śaṅkara’s commentaries are written in Sanskrit, the sacred repository of our nation’s highest culture, and the original language of the texts that expound Brahmavidyā

(knowledge of Brahman). Those who aspire to acquire this supreme knowledge—and to preserve and enrich our cultural heritage—must learn Sanskrit. The acquisition of Sanskrit and Vedānta knowledge cultivates profound refinement of mind and character. Other nations, no doubt, have cultural treasures and distinguished languages, and while these languages convey sāttvika, rājasa, and tāmasa thoughts, Sanskrit alone is the language of the highest spiritual culture, emphasizing the purest and loftiest ideals. Today, while many nations prioritize material enjoyment and progress through forms of mutual exploitation, our tradition proclaims the oneness of Paramātman—a truth that encompasses not only humanity but all beings.

The Sacred Truth of Vedānta

Vedānta teaches that the Ātman is all. This sacred truth leads to authentic elevation. Humans may strive to dominate one another, yet the eternal truth of the Ātman's unity in all beings remains inviolate. That Paramātman is the eye of the eye, the ear of the ear, the breath of the breath, the mind of the mind—eternal and unsurpassed bliss embodied.

To disregard such a Paramātman and instead plead with the senses for pleasure is the height of folly! Śaṅkarabhagavatpāda has shown that this principle of the Supreme Self (Paramātmatattva) is taught by Vedānta, based on universal experience, making it truly accessible to all. His language is notable for its clarity and simplicity. His teachings contain no esoteric riddles—only direct experiential insights and impeccable logic. The visage of one who realizes this truth becomes radiant with joy. As portrayed in the Upaniṣads, a guru once remarked to his accomplished disciple: "Ah, you look like a knower of Brahman!" Indeed, the knower of Brahman is freed from sorrow and delusion, embodying unshakable happiness in every circumstance. Whoever realizes this attains Sarvātma-bhāva (oneness with all), inheriting the bliss of eternity.

Study, Practice, and Purification

While we may now engage in elevated discussions of Vedānta, to truly experience its essence, we must turn to Śaṅkarācārya's Bhāṣyas, written in Sanskrit. Thankfully, these commentaries have been translated into many regional languages, including Kannada, and are available with original text, annotations, and summaries. With sincere intention, anyone can access Śaṅkara's profound insights.

Yet, mere intellectual understanding gained from books is insufficient for experiential realization of the Tattva (Truth). Practice is essential. At present, even as we articulate noble Vedāntic principles, our inner selves often remain impure, tainted by rājasic and tāmasic tendencies. As Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahaṁsa beautifully illustrated: some birds, though flying high in the sky, keep their eyes fixed on a piece of meat below. Likewise, even while speaking of lofty Vedāntic truths, our minds remain tethered to sensual pleasures. Therefore, purification through steadfast practice of scriptural disciplines is indispensable. Many of us have strayed from our ancestral traditions and customs. To correct this, we must renew our interest in spiritual wisdom, adopt virtuous conduct and noble thoughts, and strengthen our faith and devotion to the Lord. We must honor our elders and teachers, cultivating the habit of listening humbly to the truth they impart.

A Word of Gratitude and Hope

The keen interest, faith, and enthusiasm shown by the people of Hubli in listening to Vedānta over these past two months have filled me with both wonder and joy. In this age

when many are engrossed in worldly concerns, it is rare to find individuals willing to dedicate even an hour a day to the pursuit of the highest truth. Witnessing such earnest participation for two months is truly remarkable and heartening. Who would not be delighted to discover such sustained interest in spiritual wisdom among our people?

As the Lord has said:

“tad viddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā”—

“Learn that by humble reverence, by inquiry, and by service.”

The spirit of inquiry still lives on; seekers in search of worthy teachers and eager to investigate the truth alongside them can still be found, even today. If, realizing that the all-knowing Paramātman dwells within us as the silent witness of all our actions and thoughts, we strive to elevate ourselves—even in the smallest way—then this two-month series of lectures will not have been in vain.

May that Supreme Lord bless us all with fulfillment through virtuous conduct and noble thoughts!

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An Afterword by Sri Sri Galavanna

At the request of the Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya, I authorized the publication of this series of lectures in their monthly magazine. When I began these lectures, I lacked a clear plan for their commencement or conclusion. As I addressed each day's topic to the best of my ability, the inspiration for subsequent topics arose organically, shaping them into a lecture series.

These lectures inevitably contain repetitions. Verses, Upanishadic statements, and other scriptural excerpts have been quoted primarily from memory. In preparing these lectures for publication, based on the notes taken by two individuals during the sessions, I reconstructed the topics into coherent sentences, drawing upon my recollections. While burdened with other writing obligations, I endeavored to contribute topics for each issue of the magazine in between. However, I have not been able to critically review the entire book from beginning to end. Consequently, the book may contain several errors.

For the present, readers should be mindful of the following: Numerous books, both large and small, circulate under the name of Sri Shankarabhagavatpada, and similarly, many works are attributed to various prominent figures known as followers of Shankara. Determining the true authorship of these works is now challenging. To confidently assert that a work represents Shankara's teachings, it must demonstrably be based on the Prasthana Traya (the three starting points). Therefore, in these lectures, I have endeavored to present the most essential teachings of Sri Shankarabhagavatpada and the distinctive features of his Vedanta process, selecting verses from the Bhashyas (commentaries) of Sri Shankarabhagavatpada.

With this understanding, readers should forgive any repetitions present in these lectures. These repetitions are excusable due to the nature of the teachings of the commentators...

In the current era, many people are promoting interpretations inconsistent with authentic scriptural experiences, attributing them incorrectly to Shankara. Therefore, it is crucial to consistently guide seekers towards the genuine understanding and resolutely refute any misleading notions that contradict it.

This context necessitates addressing certain shortcomings in prevailing Vedanta teachings. These observations are offered not in a spirit of debate, but to openly express disagreement with anyone who misrepresents Shankaracharya's teachings in the name of Vedanta, regardless of their identity or platform. True seekers of knowledge should not take offense, as Vedanta prioritizes principles over personalities. My intention is not to cause distress, but solely to convey the Acharya's authentic views. True seekers will evaluate opinions based on their alignment with scriptural experiences, not merely on the prominence of the person advocating them or the number of adherents.

I hope these lectures will benefit those engaged in Vedanta thought, enabling them to grasp the extraordinary teachings of Sri Shankarabhagavatpada. Those with doubts regarding the topics discussed, or who wish to understand the Acharya's perspective on significant subjects not covered here, are welcome to contact the office for clarification. In

closing, I express my gratitude to Sri Shankarabhagavatpada for facilitating the smooth delivery of these lectures.

Some Publications (Sri Sri Galavara Upanyasa Malikegalu - Series of Lectures)

The following is a list of publications in the Sri Sri Galavara Upanyasa Malikegalu (Series of Lectures):

No.	Title	(Number of Lectures)	Pages
1.	Vedantavu Adhunika Janajeevanavu	(3 lectures)	45
2.	Brahmavidye	(7 lectures)	52
3.	Anubhavaparyantavada Atmavichara	(6 lectures)	59
4.	Paripurnadarshana	(8 lectures)	69
5.	Sarvavyavaharatitavada Paramartha	(9 lectures)	87
6.	Shankaravedantada Mulatatvagalu	(21 lectures)	100
7.	Adhyatmavidye	(26 lectures)	122
8.	Jeevantavedanta	(55 lectures)	200
9.	Anubhavagamyavedanta	(5 lectures)	264
10.	Dakshinamurtistotra	(10 lectures)	29
11.	Bhagavadgiteya Upanyasagalu Bhaga (1+2)	(198 lectures)	1192
12.	Sri Shankarabhagavatpadara Sarvasammatopadeshagalu (Now in your hands)	(54 lectures)	400

In this series, Sri Sacchidanandendra Saraswati Mahaswamiji elucidates Shankaravedanta with exceptional clarity. All who consider themselves disciples of Sri Shankarabhagavatpada should recognize that these lectures are deeply rooted in Vedanta thought. Readers of these lectures will undoubtedly become better equipped to study Sri Shankara's Prasthanatraya Bhashyas directly. These books are valuable resources for both Vedanta lecturers and students.

For the full price list of books, please contact:

Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya
Thyagaraja Nagar, Bangalore - 28
Ph: 080-6765548

Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya
Holenarasipura - 573 21
Ph: 08175-73820

Remembrance of the Founder

Śrī Śrī Saccidānandendra Sarasvatī Mahāsvāmī, widely regarded as the Abhinava Śaṅkarācārya of Karnataka, was a prominent 20th-century authority on Śāṃkara Vedānta. His Prasthānatraya Bhāṣyas of Śrī Śaṅkara, enriched with translations, notes, and critical introductions, have proven invaluable to Kannada-speaking spiritual seekers unfamiliar with Sanskrit.

Born on January 5, 1880, as Y. Subbarao, he was known as Subbraya until he took *saṃnyāsa* on June 10, 1948, at the age of 68, becoming Śrī Śrī Saccidānandendra Sarasvatī Svāmī.

Śrī Śrī embodied the principle of continuous Vedānta contemplation, dedicating his life from dawn to dusk, and from birth to death, to the study, contemplation, discourse, and writing of Vedanta texts, thus earning the fitting title *puruṣasarasvatī*. His extensive body of work, comprising over two hundred publications in Kannada, English, and Sanskrit, has secured his lasting legacy in the world of Vedānta. The Adhyātma Prakāsha Kāryālaya, which he founded, has gained international recognition as a center for spiritual knowledge.

The revered one, the Abhinava Śaṅkarācārya of Karnataka, attained *brahmabhūta* on August 5, 1975 (1880-1975). His *mahāsāmādhi* *pīṭha* is located in Holenarasipura.

brahmanisthaya vidmahe samyamyamindraya dhimahi |
tannah sacchidanandah prachodayat ||

"Om Namo Bhagawate Sacchidanandaya"